

12th Day of Riḍván Holy Day Celebration

By Susan Gammage ¹

As you come in to the celebration, listen to the nightingale's song and imagine yourself in the Garden of Riḍván <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtkZRO-FYTM>

The Story of Baha'u'llah's Exile from Start to Finish

<http://www.paintdrawer.co.uk/david/folders/Spirituality/001%3DBahai/Ridvan.htm>

Release from the Siyah-Chal

One day Bahá'u'lláh's brother was being chased by a gang hoping to injure him. As he made it to the entrance of the Russian Consulate, they robbed him of his cloak. When the Russian Consul heard about this and then learnt of Bahá'u'lláh's brutal imprisonment in an underground reservoir, he straight away rose up before the Shah, and by using his great influence and pressure, brought about Bahá'u'lláh's release. Iran moved Bahá'u'lláh far away, to Baghdad; the Russians appointed guards to protect Him along the way, threatening that if a hair should be lost from His head, war would follow and burn Iran to cinders.

Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad

Bahá'u'lláh stayed in Baghdad for ten years; He shone before all men and spread the Call of God, every day inspiring life into the community of the Báb, and causing every heart to tremble with wonder.

Decision to Remove Bahá'u'lláh from Baghdad

Baghdad was very close to Persia and several of its shrine cities - a crossroads for Iranian pilgrims, and a haven and hotbed for political exiles. News of Bahá'u'lláh's extraordinary popularity with everyone poured endlessly into Tihnan, and the authorities feared Bahá'u'lláh would influence their pilgrims, and perhaps use His rising prominence to threaten the Persian government. In their meetings and gatherings, they tirelessly searched for ways to bring about Bahá'u'lláh's expulsion, and the remorseless picture they built up filled the Shah with fear.

For three long years, they tried every plot, persuasion and pressure to cause Istanbul to hand Bahá'u'lláh over to them, or to drive Him away; they then sought other governments to do the same; but Istanbul stood solidly by Bahá'u'lláh. Arranging for learned scholars to expose Bahá'u'lláh as ignorant, they walked away wholly satisfied. They incited gangs and hired assassins to have Bahá'u'lláh killed violently, but Bahá'u'lláh faced them unarmed, without fear or harm. The Persian Ambassador became so frustrated at their lack of success, he cut off all connection to that government and refused to see the Sultan's ministers, until, at last, Istanbul found no alternative but to yield and move Bahá'u'lláh away. The Shah asked the Sultan to wipe out Bahá'u'lláh's

¹ Prepared by David Bowie (2023) for posting, with permission of author, at https://bahai-library.com/gammage_holy_day_programs

influence and make sure He was moved very far away. They made a deal, and a telegram was sent to Baghdad directing His move out to Istanbul.

Conveying the Message

The Governor of Baghdad admired Bahá'u'lláh immensely. When he received this telegram, he was quite unable to convey it, and had to be ordered a great many times; he responded that Bahá'u'lláh had lived there ten years, and no fault was ever seen in Him. News of this telegram could not be contained however, and inevitably it began to spread.

Tablet of the Holy Mariner

Bahá'u'lláh was encamped with His followers in an open area outside the City to mark the new year, and after a few days His secretary came out from His tent, and with Bahá'u'lláh's companions all gathered around him, he began chanting to them the Tablet of the Holy Mariner . The friends had never before felt such overwhelming sorrow, as they realised the period of Baghdad was just about to close. He finished chanting, and then Bahá'u'lláh Himself spoke, comparing all the tents to the distractions of the world: that they are no sooner spread, than they are rolled back. Saying this, He immediately ordered them folded up, and requested everyone return to the City.

Messenger

The tents were still being put away, when a messenger arrived with an invitation to a meeting at the Governor's headquarters. He handed it to Bahá'u'lláh, Who accepted it; Bahá'u'lláh, however, made it known that His mission was not with rulers and officials, and therefore had no cause to meet at the Court House. Instead, He suggested meeting the next day, in the mosque, just across the street from the Governor.

Tumult

A great tumult quickly seized and spread amongst Bahá'u'lláh's companions. Refusing to sleep or eat, many resolved to end their lives the moment they were parted from Him. Bahá'u'lláh with His loving-kindness gradually drew them away from their course, and resigned them to His good-pleasure.

Meeting at Mosque

The appointed hour came, and the Governor arrived at the mosque. He felt too ashamed of his task, and sent in his deputy to pass on the order exiling Bahá'u'lláh to Istanbul, the capital of the Empire. The order was presented to Bahá'u'lláh in the mosque, and, as was the custom, made His own choice. Bahá'u'lláh gave His decision to go there, and the government provided Him with money to make the journey. Bahá'u'lláh accepted it, and immediately distributed the money to the poor.

When Bahá'u'lláh was summoned before the magistrates, Abdu'l-Bahá stepped forward and declared his firm desire to go in Bahá'u'lláh's place; but Bahá'u'lláh prevented this,

and went Himself. Great numbers of people assembled about Bahá'u'lláh's house, and when they saw Him leave, they were one and all thrown into a most visible grief, feeling He might never return to them.

The magistrates respected and loved Bahá'u'lláh, and having found themselves unable to stop or change the exile, they apologised with great sorrow. Bahá'u'lláh remained in conference with them all day, yet there was no way to prevent the decree.

Initial Reaction to the News

His followers were still gathered about the house when the news arrived, and their hearts sank to the depths. The fierce natures of many Arabs present, billowed to the surface with violent declarations, and they implored Bahá'u'lláh not to desert them, feeling that without Him as their shepherd, they would die. Although desiring to go alone, His family wept and insisted so intensely that they accompany Him, He in the end agreed they could, and named those who would stay behind. He said they must prepare to set out on the exile in two weeks'. However, the next day they utterly overran the house, and no preparations were possible.

Progressive Allusion

Gradually Bahá'u'lláh began to convey to His future followers what was approaching. His festive, soul-entrancing poems and writings, the conversations He held and the change in His manner, were full of hints of the prophetic office and leadership He was about to take on. Exaltation and sadness would flood His soul, and a boundless ecstasy filled His lovers' hearts.

Tablets Chanted

In the night time, His secretary would gather them all together in his room, close the door, and under the light of many fragrant candles, he would chant for them the newly-revealed poems and Writings in his possession. Immersed in the realms of the spirit, they would become oblivious of the world around, and forgetting entirely the need for food, drink or sleep, would suddenly discover night having passed, and the sun approaching noon.

Preparations to Leave

The next few weeks were exceptionally busy. Bahá'u'lláh revealed a personal Tablet for every one of His friends in Baghdad, adult and child alike, writing for them with His Own hand; He received innumerable visitors, and made the practical preparations necessary for the caravan journey. The arrangements required for the journey were exceptionally demanding.

Decision for Riḍván

Bahá'u'lláh suggested moving across the River into the garden of one of His friends, and there with Abdu'l-Bahá receive the visitors, freeing the house from the turmoil of people and allowing the family to pack. The Master made the arrangements for Bahá'u'lláh to go to the Garden, and in every way he could, shielded Bahá'u'lláh from the pounding insistence of the world around.

This suggestion of moving out from the house was repeated amongst the friends and quickly became distorted, until a rumour circulated that Bahá'u'lláh was being taken away alone, and everyone came pouring in in masses, wild with grief and unable to be calmed.

Preparing the Garden

Provisions were moved into the Garden; a tent was set in the centre for Bahá'u'lláh, and other tents were ranged throughout the Garden, forming a little village.

The Garden was blooming with bright red roses, colourful flowers, tulips, and luxuriantly green trees. A pool of water stood in the middle of Bahá'u'lláh's tent, and everywhere outside, streams of water flowed in all directions. Everyone was devoted to making the Garden more beautiful than it had ever been.

Departure for the Garden - 22 April

On the appointed afternoon, in the nineteenth year of the Faith, the 22 April 1863, Bahá'u'lláh emerged from the inner room of the House, and set out with Abdu'l-Bahá toward the Garden that lay over the River, ten minutes from the City gate. On His head He now wore conspicuously a taj, a tall, beautifully-adorned felt hat that He from that moment on would wear throughout His ministry.

Gathering for Bahá'u'lláh

People of every rank, nationality and walk of life gathered from all quarters of the City and thronged the approaches of His house: men and women of every age, friends and strangers from every social class, the poor, the orphaned and the outcast, merchants, notables, clerics and officials, the vast majority unconnected to the Faith of the Báb, the Bahá'í ladies congregating together in the courtyard; all waited, amazed, heartbroken and apprehensive.

Stepping Outside

As Bahá'u'lláh stepped outside, a rush of people poured forward from all directions, humbling themselves before Him, weeping greatly. Bahá'u'lláh stood for some time amidst the weeping and the lamenting hearts, speaking words of comfort, and promising to receive each of them later in the Garden. When He had walked some way toward the gate, amid the crowds, a child of just a few years rushed forward and clung to His robes, weeping aloud, and begging in his tender voice that He not leave. They were lamenting the departure of One Who, for a decade, had imparted to them the warmth of His love, and the radiance of His spirit, Who had been the refuge and guide for all.

Into the Street

As He descended the steps from the courtyard into the narrow street, just before it joins the main road, the entire area was thronging with people, both believers and others, and all movement was impossible. Friends could not be distinguished from strangers, and the sound of lamentation and grief rose up everywhere from all alike. Suckling babies were cast under Bahá'u'lláh's feet. He raised those infants tenderly, one by one, blessing them, and gently and lovingly replaced them in their sorrowing mothers' arms, charging

them to bring up those dear flowers of humanity to serve God in steadfast faith and truth. Men threw themselves in His path, hoping that His feet might touch them and bless them as He passed. It took Him some minutes to place each foot upon the ground. One man had an only child, which had come to him late in his life, and he stripped the clothes from the child's body and placing it at Bahá'u'lláh feet, he cried, "Naked I give you my child, my precious child, to do with as you will: only promise not to leave us in distress! Without you, we cannot live."

Everyone was crying, pressing in to approach Bahá'u'lláh, to hear His words, touch Him or receive a comforting glance, howling and weeping at their loss, seeing no more value in life. Bahá'u'lláh bade each person farewell, caressing and soothing everyone. Such grief they had, that all those who were to accompany Bahá'u'lláh sorrowed along with those to be left behind.

Toward the River

The streets and housetops all along His way were crowded with Bahá'u'lláh's friends; such a commotion, Baghdad had rarely seen. Upon the way, and with an open hand, Bahá'u'lláh provided to the poor He had so faithfully befriended, uttering words of comfort to the disconsolate as they pleaded with Him on every side, until, at long last, Bahá'u'lláh managed to reach the banks of the River Tigris. As He prepared to cross, He entrusted the city of Baghdad to His devoted friends, that through their deeds and conduct, the flame of love would continue to glow within the hearts of its people.

Crossing the River

Bahá'u'lláh boarded a small boat waiting for Him; the people pressed all around Him, wishing to be in His Presence for as long as they could.

The boat pushed off, and ferried Bahá'u'lláh across the water, in company with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Purest Branch, another of His sons, and His secretary, and the companions on the bank all watched with sorrowing hearts as He receded into the distance.

Bahá'u'lláh set foot on the opposite bank and crossed into the Garden, just as the call of 'God is the Greatest' resounded throughout the district from the pinnacles of mosque, summoning the inhabitants to the late afternoon prayer, at two hours to sunset. Shortly after Bahá'u'lláh's arrival, the River rose up, making it difficult to cross, and it was only on the ninth day that the whole of Bahá'u'lláh's family was able to join Him.

Those Remaining on the Banks

An extraordinary exhilaration, a marvellous exaltation in the atmosphere filled the companions that day. As they remained watching on the bank, they were aware of this, yet unable to understand what in due time they were to learn.

Seeing the boat reach the other side and Bahá'u'lláh disappear in the distance, they started off on foot toward the main bridge floating on the River, they made their way to the Garden, where food was cooking and tea prepared for the friends.

The Garden of Ridván

For twelve days Bahá'u'lláh stayed in the Garden, and would be found each day in the utmost joy, walking majestically in the flower-lined avenues and amongst the trees. The friends living in Baghdad would come during the day and return home each night, whilst others would be engaged in service to those in the Garden.

Eminent rulers, clergy and jurists would come continuously to Bahá'u'lláh's tent with their insoluble problems, and take their leave satisfied with their dilemmas entirely solved.

Day 1 - Mystery Manifest

On the very first day of the Ridván festivities, Bahá'u'lláh shone out to the world like the most brilliant sun. At that critical hour and without warning, amidst the unending multitude of interrupting visitors thronging His tent and the dangers such a news would bring to His exile, Bahá'u'lláh chose to lay bare the mystery surrounding His person, and assume the power and authority of the One promised by the Báb. He made known how the effulgence of the Eternal Truth had at that moment infused all created things with the life of every divine quality, immersing creation in the sea of purification; the sword was to be utterly cast from reach; and He made it known that the next Messenger would come to the world after a thousand years. In such a way, and through many signs, Bahá'u'lláh conveyed His position to those who were present, and announced with great joy the start of the Festival of Ridván. Though on the threshold of His exile into great suffering in far-away lands, yet sadness and grief entirely vanished from everyone's hearts, and was replaced with unclouded delight.

Daily

Each day in the Garden, before the sun had dawned, the gardeners would pick the roses which lined the four avenues and pile them up in the centre of the floor inside Bahá'u'lláh's tent. So great would be the heap that His companions gathering to drink their morning tea in His presence would be unable to see each other across it. Bahá'u'lláh would entrust these roses with His own hands to the friends He would send out each morning, and on His behalf to be delivered to His Arab and Persian friends in the city.

Food was brought from the house of Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad, where His family was still in residence, and also from another house. There was much wind for some days, and Bahá'u'lláh's tent was swaying about. The friends took it in turns throughout the night and day to sit and keep the tent ropes steady in case it might be blown down, their whole happiness in so doing, being to be so nearby Bahá'u'lláh.

Bahá'u'lláh would summon a number of His companions to Him each day, and dismiss them in the evening. Those without family ties were allowed to remain for the night, with the remainder returning to their homes.

Every morning and afternoon, Bahá'u'lláh would speak of the Báb's Cause and intimate His own; without any trace of sadness, He radiated forth the utmost joy.

The notables and ordinary devoted people of the City, yearning to visit Bahá'u'lláh, were unable to bear their separation, and would arrive from Baghdad each day in streams and a succession of waves, offering their last farewell, and would take their leave with feelings of profound sorrow.

Day 5 - Roses

On the fifth night, one of the companions was watching beside Bahá'u'lláh's tent and keeping the ropes steady; as midnight approached, Bahá'u'lláh came out from His tent, and passed by the places where some of His companions were sleeping. He began to pace up and down the moonlit, flower-bordered avenues of the garden. The nightingales were singing so loudly on every side, only those nearby could make out Bahá'u'lláh's voice. He continued to walk, and paused amidst an avenue. He observed how the nightingales were sleepless from dusk till dawn enraptured with their love for the roses, communing in a burning passion of melody. How, He asked, could those afire with the rose-like beauty of the Beloved, choose to sleep?

Day 5+ Visitors

For three nights the same companion watched and circled around His tent, and found Bahá'u'lláh wakeful at all times, whilst each day, from morning to evening, Bahá'u'lláh would be engaged in ceaseless conversation with the streams of visitors flowing continuously into His presence from Baghdad.

Day 8 - Declaration to Abdu'l-Bahá

Four days before Bahá'u'lláh's departure from the Garden, He called 'Abdu'l-Bahá to His tent, and there disclosed in clear terms that He was the One to be manifest by God, and promised by the Báb.

As the Master heard these soul-stirring words, He understood why the Manifestation had once more been received such persecution, and He came to see, as a radiant vision, the world of the future when the divine Message will have changed the heart of the world. From that moment onward, a new and increased joy and devotion took possession of him, and he consecrated his whole self, body, soul and spirit, to the sacred work of the Cause.

Later, within the Garden, Bahá'u'lláh made the same declaration to four others. The time was not yet to come for a public declaration, and He enjoined these few to keep their understanding secret.

Day 9 - Family Arrive

On the ninth day, the River settled down and the flood-waters receded, allowing those in the old eastern side of the City to cross the boat bridge. The family of Bahá'u'lláh moved into the Garden, and the River overflowed a second time.

Day 12

The flooding subsided again on the twelfth day, and everyone went across the River to enter the presence of Bahá'u'lláh.

The day at last came to a close, and Bahá'u'lláh announced that He would be leaving the coming afternoon.

Day 13

This news spread; throughout the final day, visitors and the authorities of Baghdad thronged to the garden to present their final farewells.

Visitor - Alusi, the Mufti of Baghdad

A renowned jurist expert in the religious law was among the visitors. His eyes dimmed with tears, he heaped curses upon the Shah for bringing about Bahá'u'lláh's exile from Baghdad, exclaiming in a play on the monarch's name, that he was not the Helper but the Abaser of Religion.

Visitor - Governor, Namiq Pasha

The Governor himself, who in place of himself had sent a deputy to the mosque to convey the message of exile, crossed the river and visited Bahá'u'lláh. Expressing his utmost regret at the developments, he assured Bahá'u'lláh that whatever He chose to command, they would be ready to carry it out for Him. He handed a written order to the officer who would be accompanying Bahá'u'lláh, instructing the governors of the provinces near the exiles would pass, to extend them the utmost consideration. Bahá'u'lláh assured him that they had everything necessary, and all along the route, Bahá'u'lláh never permitted them to accept the exactions instructed by the Governor, always buying and paying for their own supplies. To the Governor's insistent and repeated offers of service, Bahá'u'lláh said that he should keep in mind His loved ones and deal with them with kindness. The Governor assented with unhesitating warmth to this, and found good occasion to serve their needs and protect them from violent attacks.

Enemies' Regret

The Governor remarked that in the face of such deep-seated devotion, sympathy and esteem from high and low, those who had so tirelessly sought the order for His banishment and then rejoiced at their success, were now bitterly regretting their act, and even more insistent that Bahá'u'lláh should now remain!

Governor's Horse

The Governor also had a very beautiful horse, and wished to send it to Istanbul. He requested if Bahá'u'lláh's men might look after it, and this Bahá'u'lláh granted.

Departure from Ridván Garden

After much time, the mules were loaded; eight or nine howdahs settled on them and closed up, and the ladies and children took their seats, some of these of the most jolting kind. Different people would be serving in different ways. A Turkish owner of pack mules was in charge of the baggage; the Master was on horseback, and with a number of others was watching the animals. One man stood in charge of supplies, for lending out any needed articles and seeing they were returned. All the young men, and others able to ride, mounted on their horses or rode on mules, and in the late afternoon of 3 May 1863, at the moment of the full moon, the company began upon its way, escorted by some Turkish soldiers, who behaved very respectfully to the exiles even though they were prisoners. So extraordinary was the influence of Bahá'u'lláh's personality, that all who came within its lines of force were affected and offered their courtesies.

Horse Brought and Mounted

During His many years in Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh had always chosen to ride a donkey rather than a horse. Towards sunset, amidst all the commotion, his lovers brought over an Arabian horse of the finest breed, the best they could afford. As Bahá'u'lláh's foot reached the stirrup, the red stallion bent its knees, and lowered itself, causing the people to lament ever louder. Bahá'u'lláh spoke to the horse approvingly as it recognised Who was about to mount him, and this remark burnt the hearts of everyone, until they became wholly unconscious of themselves. Bahá'u'lláh showered everyone with sweet words of consolation, and He waved farewell to all. As He mounted and was ready to depart, there was a great outpouring of grief. The lamentation, anguish and heart-rending, unbearable cries of distress of the friends and the sorrow and mourning of all the people was such that no one can ever depict. Time and again the call, 'God is the Greatest!' rang out from amongst the crowd.

Those who were to remain

Those who Bahá'u'lláh had indicated were to remain behind stood in a row. They were so entirely overcome with sorrow, that they all burst into tears. Bahá'u'lláh drew back up to them, and consoled them. He assured them it was better for the Cause that they should stay behind. He said that there were some with a tendency for causing mischief, and He was therefore taking them with Him. One of the friends was utterly beyond all control of anguish and sorrow, and addressed the crowd with a poem, declaring, "Let us all rise, to weep like the clouds of Spring; when lovers become separated from their Beloved, you hear even the wailings of the stones!"

Bahá'u'lláh was so moved by this, remarking how the poem was for just such a day. Those fortunate enough to depart with Bahá'u'lláh were sobbing and crying with them, their tears pouring out of their eyes. The clergy, jurists, rulers and commoners were all crying and weeping with them.

Bahá'u'lláh mounted His horse again. One of the friends placed a sack of coins in front of the saddle, and Bahá'u'lláh distributed the coins amongst the poor who were standing by

and wailing. They broke out of their order, and rushed over to Him in an unruly way. He showered the coins out among them, saying, "Gather them yourselves!"

Cannon Fired

The Governor was anxious in case Bahá'u'lláh should leave at a perilous astrological time, and hoped He would abandon the departure. He arranged for a cannon to fire at the very moment Bahá'u'lláh mounted His horse, so he would be able to determine the astrological conditions. As Bahá'u'lláh departed, the cannon burst out, and in great astonishment he discovered the sun had just moved out from the ill-omened sign into a favourable one, leaving him quite stunned by Bahá'u'lláh's effortless awareness of every detail.

On the Move

The steed moved, and everyone shouted, "God is most Glorious - Upon Him rest Majesty and Splendour!" That day witnessed for the first time Bahá'u'lláh's splendid horsemanship. Heads on every side bowed down to the dust at the feet of His horse and kissed its hoofs; countless individuals pressed forward to embrace His stirrups. Many cast themselves in front of the horse, preferring death to separation. It seemed as if it were a heavenly steed passing over blessed bodies and pure hearts. Throughout the multitude was the murmur and cry that the tumult of the Hour of Gathering and Resurrection was unfolding before their very own eyes. Each would speak with his neighbour of the mysteries of this Manifestation.

The scenes of tumultuous enthusiasm were as spectacular and even more touching than at His departure for the Garden. Believers and unbelievers alike sobbed and lamented, and the chiefs and notables congregated there were struck with wonder, as no one escaped the all-encompassing emotions, rising up to such heights that no tongue could ever describe.

Among the bowing and fervent multitude of admirers, the affection and grief was visible all around. Through the power of God, Bahá'u'lláh rode forth from the Garden with such majesty and power as none could fail to acknowledge. The marks of homage and devotion continued to surround Him until He reached Istanbul.

Left Behind

Those left behind saw Bahá'u'lláh disappear from their sight toward an unknown destination, amidst the company of his family and twenty-six disciples. Sad at heart and utterly distressed in soul, as they returned empty-hearted and disconsolate to Baghdad, little did they know that Bahá'u'lláh was like the sun starting to rise towards its zenith; yet they felt unspeakable joy surging within them, overcoming all their bitter sorrows with a great and mysterious radiancy. The friends gathered together and encouraged each other to spread out and teach what had just been declared, and though actively serving the Cause, all their hearts wished for was to find their way near Bahá'u'lláh.

Following Bahá'u'lláh

Bahá'u'lláh made it known that anyone accompanying Him on the journey without permission would come to no good. Many of His friends chose to abandon Baghdad nevertheless and accompany Bahá'u'lláh in His wanderings.

One companion ran after Him for three hours. Bahá'u'lláh saw him, and getting down from His horse, awaited him. He told him with His beautiful voice full of love and kindness, to go back to Baghdad, and with the friends set about work full of energy and joy.

Bahá'u'lláh comforted him, saying He was leaving the friends He loved in Baghdad and would send them news of His welfare, and counselled them to be steadfast in their service to God and accept His Will, living in such peace as they might be allowed.

They watched Bahá'u'lláh disappear off into the darkness with sinking hearts, knowing His enemies were powerful and cruel, not knowing where they were all being taken. Weeping bitterly, they turned their faces sooner or later towards Baghdad, determining to live according to His command.

Learning of the Declaration

Whether journeying with Him or remaining in Baghdad, most of Bahá'u'lláh's companions only began to learn of His momentous declaration once He had reached Edirne and begun to spread it publicly.

As this news reached every ear, the friends were transported into worlds of exultation and new insight that shone constantly in their hearts and guided them throughout the years.

Closing Prayer - Ridván tablet chanted in Arabic:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BNyPcMytGo>