

MEMORANDUM

To: The Universal House of Justice

Date: 19 May 2003

From: Research Department

In Vitro Fertilization and Related Issues

A number of questions have been raised recently about issues pertaining to in vitro fertilization and related approaches designed to assist couples experiencing difficulties in fulfilling their desire to have a family. This memorandum is prepared with the aim of assembling the pertinent material found in authoritative texts of the Faith, for use in responding to such questions in the future.

1. The General Issue

In a number of letters written on its behalf, the Universal House of Justice has confirmed the permissibility of Bahá'í couples' exploring the use of certain recently developed procedures which seek to facilitate the process of conception, within limits set out in the Bahá'í teachings.

The Bahá'í view is very balanced. While appreciating the value of the new medical techniques which enable previously childless couples to enjoy the blessings of a family, the teachings define such limits as are necessary to preserve the dignity of the individual and the sanctity of marriage.

(25 October 1984, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

Some of these limits are discussed in succeeding sections of this memorandum.

The process of seeking medical assistance when difficulties are being experienced should also be considered in the light of the advice given by the House of Justice to believers in such circumstances:

The House of Justice exhorts you, when you have taken all possible steps, to accept God's Will, whether or not that means having children of your own, and to turn your faces towards the many fields of service to humanity.

(12 October 1987, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a Bahá'í couple)

You may find it comforting to realize that the Bahá'í teachings indicate that the bearing of children is but one of the purposes of marriage, albeit the primary one. Bahá'ís who find that their marriage is not blessed with children may partake of many of the meritorious functions associated with parenthood through adoption or through assisting in the education of children.

(19 September 2001, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

2. In Vitro Fertilization

Responding to questions about this method of assisting conception, the House of Justice has stated:

In the matter of in vitro fertilization, the House of Justice does not wish to make any definite ruling at the present time because of the far-reaching implications. For the present, it is left to the individual Bahá'ís concerned to decide whether or not they wish to use this process as a means of having children.

(12 October 1987, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a Bahá'í couple)

It has also explained that:

The Universal House of Justice has considered the question of whether Bahá'ís are required to take extraordinary measures to facilitate the natural process of conception. For the present, it is left to the Bahá'í couple to decide whether or not they wish to use in vitro fertilization as a means of having children. The use of such procedures is clearly a matter of choice, and not a requirement. In this regard, there is value in obtaining the best medical advice available.

(6 May 1996, from a memorandum prepared by the Universal House of Justice addressed to a Department at the Bahá'í World Centre)

The use of this procedure gives rise to other issues which have been brought to the attention of the House of Justice, including that of multiple ovulation, on which the following guidance has been provided:

With respect to the question of multiple ovulation and pregnancies induced through the use of certain chemical agents, the House of Justice knows of nothing in the Writings on this matter. Since the process described is essentially only an accentuation of a normal process, i.e., inducing ovulation where formerly there was some physiological obstacle to successful release of ova, the possibility of multiple pregnancies may be viewed as the chance that is taken in achieving an otherwise successful outcome to a therapeutic intervention.

(30 August 1988, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Another issue concerns the use of other embryos which are fertilized as part of the in vitro process but which are not used. The response provided to this question has been:

The House of Justice has, to date, made no ruling concerning the disposition of unwanted embryos, which may occur as part of the in vitro fertilization procedure. For the present, it is left to the individual Bahá'ís concerned to decide whether the embryos not used in a cycle of treatment should be frozen for possible use in future treatments.

(24 April 2000, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a Bahá'í couple)

3. Artificial Insemination

A related procedure is that of artificial insemination, as a means of accomplishing fertilization of the ovum. On this subject, the House of Justice has written:

In relation to artificial insemination, the beloved Guardian in a letter written on his behalf to an individual believer states: "...there is no objection to having a baby by means of artificial insemination as long as your husband is the father of it." While artificial insemination is a very different process from in vitro fertilization, the principle enunciated by the Guardian is the same, namely, that to be acceptable to Bahá'ís the egg cell of the wife should be fertilized by the sperm of the husband in the procedure.

(25 October 1984, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

A consequence of this guidance is that a Bahá'í should not participate in the "genetical donation" procedure by which semen is provided for a woman to whom he is not married. The clarification of the House of Justice is:

In relation to a question about the appropriateness of a Bahá'í making "genetical donations", the House of Justice, in a letter written on its behalf, states that "...it would not be proper for a Bahá'í to donate semen to a hospital for the artificial insemination of a woman other than his wife."

(25 October 1984, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

4. Surrogate Mothers

Yet another related matter is that of the use of a surrogate mother, in whom a fertilized ovum is implanted with the expectation that she will carry it through the period of pregnancy. On this subject, the House of Justice has responded with the following guidance:

The spiritual and social implications involved in the use of surrogate mothers to provide for the gestation of the embryo, even when the embryo results from the fertilization of the husband's sperm and the wife's egg cell which is later implanted into the womb of the third party, are too far-reaching for such a procedure to be permissible to Bahá'ís.

(25 October 1984, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

Further guidance was provided by the House of Justice in a letter dated 4 September 1989, written on its behalf to a National Spiritual Assembly, responding to another possibility, "...that of in vitro fertilization with a donor egg and a donor sperm. In this instance, the Bahá'í woman would be acting as a surrogate mother hosting the embryo during the period of gestation. The Universal House of Justice does not feel that this procedure is permissible for Bahá'ís."

When asked for additional clarification on the use of surrogate mothers, the House of Justice stated:

The proposed procedure leads to a mechanistic use of the human body, incompatible with the dignity assigned to the individual in the Bahá'í teachings. Apart from legal questions to which such a procedure could give rise, it should be remembered that, since human beings are endowed with a spiritual nature, an accurate assessment of the implications of the physical actions in which an individual engages must include consideration of the spiritual, emotional and psychological effects of these actions; this interrelationship is evident on examining the emphasis placed in the Bahá'í teachings on modesty, chastity and fidelity. The use of a surrogate for the gestation of an embryo would raise a number of issues pertaining to the future impact on the child itself, as well as the emotional ties between the surrogate and the child, and also between the donor of the ovum and the child.

(22 November 1989, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

5. The Condition of the Soul

Questions have arisen on occasion from believers concerning the soul in relation to the various techniques to assist in the fertilization of the ovum. Such questions are best considered by examining the passages in the authoritative writings of the Faith which deal with the relationship of the soul to the body.

Bahá'u'lláh has written, in the *Súriy-i-Ra'ís*, that:

Know that the soul which is common to all men cometh forth following the commingling of things and after their maturation, as thou dost observe in the germ: once it hath developed to its predestined stage, God manifesteth the soul that was latent within it. The Lord, verily, doeth what He willeth and ordaineth what he pleaseth.

(*The Summons of the Lord of Hosts* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2002), p. 153)

A similar statement has been made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

...the spirit encircles the body at the beginning of the amalgamation of the elements and natures in the womb; the power of the spirit begins then to appear in the body gradually and successively according to the preparation and capacity to receive that everlasting abundance.

(*Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas*, vol. I (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1930 printing) p. 157)

In response to the question, "What is the wisdom of the spirit's appearing in the body?", the Master indicates that "the spirit of man is the cause of the life of the body".¹ He states that,

¹ *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1994), pp. 200–201.

...when the elements are arranged and combined in the most glorious system, organization and manner, the human spirit will appear and be manifest in them. This is the decree of the Powerful, the Wise.

(Some Answered Questions, p. 201)

Elsewhere, 'Abdu'l-Bahá comments on the nature of the relationship between the soul and the body, indicating that:

...the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body—that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body, so in quitting it, it will not be in need of an abiding-place: no, the spirit is connected with the body, as this light is with this mirror. When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear.

The rational soul—that is to say, the human spirit—has neither entered this body nor existed through it; so after the disintegration of the composition of the body, how should it be in need of a substance through which it may exist? On the contrary, the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists. The personality of the rational soul is from its beginning; it is not due to the instrumentality of the body, but the state and the personality of the rational soul may be strengthened in this world; it will make progress and will attain to the degrees of perfection, or it will remain in the lowest abyss of ignorance, veiled and deprived from beholding the signs of God.

(Some Answered Questions (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1994), pp. 239–240)

Further insight into the mysterious nature of the relationship between the soul and body can be obtained from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, where He states:

Know thou that the soul of man is exalted above, and is independent of all infirmities of body or mind. That a sick person showeth signs of weakness is due to the hindrances that interpose themselves between his soul and his body, for the soul itself remaineth unaffected by any bodily ailments. Consider the light of the lamp. Though an external object may interfere with its radiance, the light itself continueth to shine with undiminished power. In like manner, every malady afflicting the body of man is an impediment that preventeth the soul from manifesting its inherent might and power.

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, section LXXX, paragraph 2)

In response to a question, Shoghi Effendi has explained:

With regard to the soul of man: According to the Bahá'í Teachings the human soul starts with the formation of the human embryo, and continues to develop and pass through endless stages of existence after its separation from the body. Its progress is thus infinite.

(31 December 1937, to an individual believer)

This clarification should be considered in conjunction with the following guidance of the Universal House of Justice:

...the Bahá'í Writings affirm that the human soul comes into being at the time of conception. However, they do not clearly define the exact biological moment and nature of the event described as "conception" and this may, indeed, be a question that is insoluble by human thought or investigation, since it relates to mysteries of the spiritual world and the nature of the soul itself.

A statement about Bahá'í beliefs on a subject such as this would, it seems, be of little help to the general public in isolation from the more fundamental and important Bahá'í Teachings, and is unlikely to further the teaching work.

(6 February 1997, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

The believers are free to come to their own conclusions about the condition of the soul in relation to the various techniques designed to assist fertilization in the light of the texts of the Faith set out here and elsewhere in the authoritative Bahá'í Writings.