

Doors of hope

Baha'i western-women pilgrimage to the Holy Land

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(slide 1:) Since its beginning, the Baha'i faith saw pilgrimage as one of the rituals that the believer should fulfill, at least once, during his lifetime. This tradition was originated in the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) "Pillar of Islam" and the Shia tradition to visit Holy places of historical significant [like Karbala in Iraq where Imam Husayn ibn Ali was killed by Yazid I in 61 AH (680 CE)] or to graves and mausoleum of Holy figures [like the eighth Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad].

In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (the most holy book) Baha'u'llah, the prophet and founder of the Bahai religion, declared that the pilgrim's destination should be the house of the Bab in Shiraz and his house, where he used to live between 1853-1863, in Bagdad.

(slide 2:) In 1863 Baha'u'llah and his family members were ordered by the Ottoman authorities to move from Bagdad to Istanbul, the capital city, then to Edirne (Adrianople) and finally, at 1868, to Akko, a small town in northern Palestine, then a remote part of the Ottoman empire. During the years that Baha'u'llah lived in Akko the city became the center for Bahai pilgrims, all of them from the east and mainly from the "Shia threshold" [nowadays Iran and southern Iraq], that prayed for the opportunity to see their prophet face from the window of his prison fortress in the first years, meet him in his city house and country Mansion in his last years, and made their respect to his Shrine in the Mansion of Bahaji after he die in 1892.

(slide 3:) Those pilgrims used to bring money and other offerings to the shrine but mainly different types of plants that were planted in the places that were related to the life of Baha'u'llah and made them a perfect place for worship his memory. That, and due to difficulties reaching Iran or Iraq, make the city of Akko the focus of Baha'i pilgrimage and northern Palestine became the Baha'is "holy land". Traditionally these pilgrims held the customary rituals of the East, especially of the Muslim traditions, as part of the admiration of the saints that included shedding of shoes at the entrance to a sacred place, kissing the hands of the leader, traditional clothing etc.

After Baha'u'llah past away, in 1892, Abdul-Baha, his son and successor, started to spread the Bahai faith in the world by sending Bahai Teachers and preacher to the east, Mainly to India, and to the western world and specially to the United

states. Although not the first Bahai that came to the United states (the first one was, probably, Anton Haddad), Ibrahim Kheiralla (1849-1929), a Syrian immigrant that accepted the Bahai faith in 1890, started to teach the new faith and talked about the new prophet, wherever and whenever possible, around the united states.

(slide 5:) Among The listeners of Kheiralla lectures were a large number of women, most of them from christen background, that were Drawn to the stories about the charismatic prophet and found the ideas of the new religion as very liberals and advanced to their time, such as the principle of equality between the sexes and races, and that at the time when the United States was still segregated between racial and women could not vote or be elected to any governmental position in most of the states [Finland, the third state in the world that granted the right to vote to women, did it in 1906, while the United States was given this right only in 1920].

The first female Bahai in the united states was Louise Aurora (Lua) Getsinger (1871-1916) that became Bahai, with her husband Edward, in 1897 and started to teach the new faith in the state of New York and California where the couple met Phoebe Hearst (1842-1919), the wife of California senator George Hearst and the mother of William Randolph Hearst the Press tycoon, and convert her and her black butler, Robert Turner, to the Bahai faith. With the Getsingers support, Phoebe Hearst, desiring to meet the new Master and the son of the Prophet, arranged a tour to Egypt and Akko at the Autumn-winter of 1898. On the way to Egypt the company that include also the Kheiralla family, stopped in Paris where they met Mrs. Hearst nieces and her friend May Ellis Bolles (later Maxwell), that accepted the faith at that time, and invite them to take part in the pilgrimage to Akko.

(slide 6:) It is impossible not to admire this group of pilgrims. Out of fourteen members, eleven were women ranging from twenty years to fifty-six years old. These women, who have lived all their lives in the modern and liberal world went to explore the mysteries of the Middle East conservative and patriarchal society, without the knowledge of local language and culture, pounding their mind to meet "a spiritual teacher"(a Guru?) that they heard about only a short time earlier.

Imagine sailing in the Mediterranean Sea turbulent, the carriage rides on unpaved roads, the heat in the country without a shadow of tree, the encounter with the local peasants and wild Bedouins, the experience of passing though biblical landscapes and places mentioned in the holy scripts, the curiosity and expectation and perhaps you will understand the depth of their feelings the way to Akko.

(slide 7) The first of the group, and the first western believers, that reached Akko were the Getsingers and Kheiralla that met Abdul-Baha at his house at the December 10th 1898. In a letter to her friend in Chicago, Lua Getsinger express her feeling when she met Abdul-Baha: **"we stood thus for a moment, unable to move, then my heart gave a great throb, and scarcely knowing what I was doing' I held out my arms, crying, 'my lord! my lord!' and rushed to him, kneeling at his blessed feet, sobbing like a child. In an instant my husband was beside me, crying as only men can cry. He [Abdul-Baha] put his hands upon our bowed heads and said, in a voice that seems to our ears like a strain of sweet music, 'welcome! Welcome!'"**.

It is interesting to see how the Getsingers, coming from liberal-western culture and Protestant Christianity, both Opposed the idea of Kneeling before any person (king or religious leader) adopts a practice that characteristic the Eastern culture [and the Roman Catholic world]. And we should ask ourselves whether it was a spontaneous reaction to the event or was influenced by the practice of Oriental believers that they saw, or were instructed, before the visit. Since this ritual was repeated also at May Bolles and other pilgrim's memoirs, it's seems that the Eastern influence was more meaningful than a spontaneous event.

(slide 8:) After the encounter with the Abdul-Baha, "the Master" as they called him, which was the main cause of their pilgrimage, the pilgrims [the other members of the group visited Akko during the winter] were invited to visit several sites around Acre that were sanctified by the local and eastern Bahais, including the Garden of Ridván (paradise) on the banks of the Na'aman River, and especially the room where Baha'u'llah used to stay in, and the Shrine of Baha'u'llah near the mansion at Bahaji. May Bolles recall that visit: **"It was a beautiful day, the sky was blue and clear, the sun shone with eastern warmth and splendor, a light breeze stirred and the air was perfumed with rose. After driving for about half an hour we reached the garden where Baha'u'llah spent much of His time during His long years of exile in Akko. Although this garden is small it is one of the loveliest spots we had ever seen. With its tall trees, its wealth of flowers, and its fountains, it lies like a peerless gem surrounded by two limpid streams of water just as it is described in the Qur'an, and the atmosphere which pervades it is so fraught with sacred memories, with divine significance, with heavenly peace and calm... We visited the little house at the end of the garden and stood on the threshold of that room**

where Baha'u'llah was wont to sit in hot weather, and one by one we knelt down, and with tears of love and longing kissed the ground where His blessed feet had rested''.

(slide 9:) Again, we have an example for an eastern practice, of Kneeling before a holy spot, is Performed. Probably for the first time, by a Western pilgrim. The adapting of oriental practice by the western pilgrims continue during their visit to the Shrine of Baha'u'llah were, as May Bolles writes: **"Abdu'l-Bahá met us opposite the group of buildings comprising the Bahaji, the terrace, the little tea-house and the Holy Tomb. When we alighted we found a group of more than one hundred oriental believers waiting for us... we saw our oriental brothers standing in a group on the grass below, perfectly motionless and silent, gazing in rapt love and devotion on the Blessed One... He [Abdul-Baha] ... said in a quiet, low tone: 'We are now going to visit the Holy Tomb. When you are praying in that divine spot remember the promise of Baha'u'llah, that those who attain this pilgrimage shall receive an answer to their prayers, and their wishes shall be granted', He then bade us follow Him and descended the steps, followed by the American pilgrim, then all the other believers in a body behind us, and in this order, the Master walking a few yards in advance, we proceeded slowly towards the Tomb of Baha'u'llah. When we reached the outer door 'Abdu'l-Bahá removed His shoes and motioned us to do likewise... As we entered, a door in the opposite corner opened and in the ladies of the holy family arrived, thickly veiled; they came forward and greeted us tenderly... The Blessed Master was calm and radiant and led us to the open space at the end of the court beside the Tomb, where, in the mellow light of a stained glass window, we all stood in silence until he bade one of our group to sing... No pen could describe the solemn beauty of that moment, as, in a broken voice, this young girl sang the praise and glory of God, while all were immersed in the ocean of the Divine Presence. The tears of the pilgrims flowed and strong men wept aloud. The 'Abdu'l-Bahá led us to the door of the Tomb where we knelt for a moment, then He opened the door and led us in. Those who have passed that threshold have been for a brief moment in the presence of God, their Creator, and no thoughts can follow them. The Tablet of the Holy Tomb was chanted by a young Persian, and when we left that blessed spot the oriental pilgrims entered slowly, until all had been within; then our**

Beloved closed the door, and after singing 'Never, My God, to Thee' at His request, we quietly withdrew".

(slide 10:) Again, we can see three eastern ritual elements that were presented to pilgrims from the West - removing shoes before entering a holy place, praying in Persian, a Language that the believers do not understand, covering the women heads with a veil, a practice the western believers adapted immediately as can be seen in a photograph that was taken a few weeks after their return from the pilgrimage that shown some members of the group with veils on their heads. Another photograph shows the group with Muslim praying beads suggested that the veil and beads were probably seen as souvenir from the east and not as part of the pilgrimage rituals.

(slide 11): May Bolles recall another ritual that Abdul-Baha fulfilled just before they left: **"He led us into the next room, and there resting on a divan against the wall was the portrait of Bahá'u'lláh. We fell on our knees before it, and the tears that flowed were of pure love and adoration. We could have remained thus forever with our eyes fastened on that wonderful face, but the Master touched us on the shoulder, that we might see also the picture of His Highness the Bab. His was a beautiful young face, but I could not keep my eyes from the eyes of Baha'u'llah"**. This ritual became one of the most significant events and highlight of the Bahais pilgrimage even today.

(slide 12:) With their return to the west, filled with faith Gaza, admiration to Abdul Baha and stocked with photos, those women began spreading the Baha'i Faith and led quickly to the establishment of Bahai communities throughout the Western world (United States, Canada, France, United Kingdom, Germany etc.). following their work, increased flow of Baha'i pilgrims, especially women, start their way to the east, desiring to meet the "master" and to visit the holy sites of their new religion. In their belonging, following the eastern tradition, they carried offerings, gifts and donations to improve the situation of the Holy Family in the Holy Land. With these donations, a large residential complex, to Abdul-Baha and his family, was built in Haifa, that include a special house to host the growing stream of Bahá'í pilgrims from the West. The construction of the Shrine of the Bab, the Precursor Prophet of the faith, on Mount Carmel soon became another focus of Baha'i pilgrimage to the holy land. Among the pilgrims at that time we can Specify women as Mary Lucas (1905), Corinne True (1907), Julia Grundy (1907), Helen Goodall and Ella Goodall Cooper

(1908), Ida Finch and Alma Knobloch (1908), Juliet Thompson (1909), Ethel J. Rosenberg (1909) and more.

(slide 13:) With the spread of the Bahá'í Faith in the West, between the years 1910-1913, Abdul-Baha made two long journeys to the West. During these journeys, organized and hosted mainly by the women Believers, Abdul-Baha visit the various Bahá'í community, took part in religious and community events, like Laying the cornerstone of the Bahai house of worship near Chicago, and spoke to various parties about the principles of the Baha'i religion. Looking at photos from those events Illustrates the large number and the important role that those faithful women played in the Bahai Faith.

(slide 14:) During World War I Palestine became enemy territory for most Western countries, which led to termination of the Bahai pilgrimage to The holy land and led Abdul-Baha to order the Western believers who lived in Akko and Haifa to leave the country until the storm passed. But immediately after the war, under the British-Christian government, the flow of Baha'i pilgrims renewed. Among those pilgrims was a group of four women that came to the holy land at the autumn of 1920. Genevieve Lenore Coy, a member of this group recall first the pilgrim's facilities: **"At the door of the Pilgrim House we were met by two Americans, Mrs. Hoagg and Malcolm McGillivray... Mrs. Hoagg had been there since early in the summer. She acted as hostess for the Pilgrim House; she showed us to our rooms. Simple, clean, and filled with a faint fragrance as of incense, is our place of rest, the place the Master has provided for those who come from the West"**. Then she continues with the meeting with the holy family: **"Immediately the ladies came in they greeted us with the Greatest Name, they inquired about our health, our journey, about the believers in America. Rouhi Effendi translated for those who did not speak English... The Holy Mother spoke about Baha'u'llah commands about education... I cannot remember much of what was said. We knew that we were very welcome. We knew that we were at home as never before!"**.

The next day, the group meet Abdul-Baha next to the shrine of the Bab. Genevieve Coy wrote in her diary: **"As the hour drew near when we were to go up the "Mountain of the Lord" to meet Abdul-Baha, I remembered one evening we had spent with Juliet Thompson not long before we had left New York. She had said with deep earnestness, 'When you are in the Master's presence do not be self-conscious, if you can help it. Do not be afraid. There is nothing to fear. He is all**

love and kindness'... Suddenly all of the believers rose and faced the East. Then, from around the corner of the Tomb came the Master with two of the young men walking a little behind him. He came slowly toward us and said, "Welcome, welcome!" in English; and then, "Sit down, sit down!" Sylvia sat next to him...I wished only to look and look at the beauty of his face! For that was what impressed me first, the exquisite beauty of the Master. It was like the most beautiful pictures we have of him, with life and color added...". Another part of the pilgrimage to the shrine was visiting the shrine himself and Coy wrote: "The care-taker opened a door at the southwest corner of the Tomb, and spread a piece of matting in front of it. Mrs. [Emogene] Hoagg went with us to show us the custom used in entering the Tomb. We removed our shoes, and then the care-taker poured rose-water on our hands... We followed Mrs. Hoagg into the first room... Mrs. Hoagg walked slowly up to the threshold, knelt there a moment in prayer and then came back to a corner of the room... then came my turn. I had heard of the custom of prostrating oneself at the threshold of the Tomb, and I had wondered whether it would not seem stilted and formal. But it did not in the least! Perhaps it was the dignity and majesty of the Tomb, perhaps it was because we had been with the Master so recently... After that moment at the threshold, I walked to the back of the room while Sylvia and Mabel in turn went forward. We knelt in prayer a long time. I cannot guess what was in the hearts of the others, but my own was filled with a great longing to lose my old selfish self, and to acquire the unselfishness of service. It was a wonderful time...".

From Genevieve Coy diary we can learn that what was twenty years ago, when the group of pilgrims from the West made the first pilgrimage to the "holy land", occurrences spontaneity has become over the years an organized ritual that included a special house to accommodate the pilgrims and an organized program that included Introduction religious classes, personal encounter with "the Master" and ceremonies and rituals, with strong Oriental influence, at the holy places.

To summaries, reading the travel literature of the Baha'i pilgrimage to the Holy land introducing two important aspects. The first is the great importance of the Very Large female representation in the preliminary faithful, pilgrims and distributors of the Baha'i faith in the West. The second t is the use of these sources for understanding the process of institutionalization of the Baha'i pilgrimage over the years, with notable oriental influence, seeped in western believers.

Thank you!

לסיכום, בדיקת ספרות המסעות של עולות הרגל הבהאיות לארץ הקודש מציגה שני היבטים חשובים. ההיבט הראשון שבהם הוא החשיבות הגדולה לייצוג הנשי הגדול מאוד בקרב ראשוני המאמינים, עולי הרגל ומפיצי האמונה הבהאית בארצות המערב. ההיבט השני הוא בשימוש במקורות אלה להבנת תהליך ההתמסדות של העלייה לרגל הבהאית במהלך השנים, תוך ספיגת השפעות מזרחיות בולטות, שחללו בקרב המאמינים המערביים.