

NINETEEN DAY FEASTS

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ORIGINS AND PURPOSE OF THE NINETEEN DAY FEAST

What is the origin of the Nineteen Day Feast?

The Nineteen-Day Feast was inaugurated by the Báb and ratified by Bahá'u'lláh, in His Holy Book, the Aqdas...

'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in *Principles of Bahá'í Administration*, p. 52

The three aspects of the Feast – devotional, administrative, social – have evolved in stages:

It is notable that the concept of the Feast evolved in stages in relation to the development of the Faith. At its earliest stage in Iran, the individual friends, in response to Bahá'u'lláh's injunctions, hosted gatherings in their homes to show hospitality once every nineteen days and derived inspiration from the reading and discussion of the Teachings. As the community grew, 'Abdu'l-Bahá delineated and emphasised the devotional and social character of the event. After the establishment of Local Spiritual Assemblies, Shoghi Effendi introduced the administrative portion and acquainted the community with the idea of the Nineteen Day Feast as an institution. It was as if a symphony, in three movements, had now been completed.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh, 27 August 1989, in *The Nineteen Day Feast*, compilation of the Universal House of Justice, pp. v-vii

What is the purpose of the Nineteen Day Feast?

Shoghi Effendi has described the Feast as the foundation of the New World Order. It brings together at the grassroots of society the spiritual, administrative and social processes necessary for the construction of a new civilisation:

The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh encompasses all units of human society; integrates the spiritual, administrative and social processes of life; and canalises human expression in its varied forms towards the construction of a new civilisation. The Nineteen Day Feast embraces all these aspects at the very base of society. Functioning in the village, the town, the city, it is an institution of which all the people of Bahá are members. It is intended to promote unity, ensure progress, and foster joy...

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh, 27 August 1989, in *The Nineteen Day Feast*, compilation of the Universal House of Justice (1989), pp. v-vii

A properly conducted Feast should result in the spiritual restoration of the friends:

As to the Nineteen Day Feast, it rejoiceth mind and heart. If this feast be held in the proper fashion, the friends will, once in nineteen days, find themselves spiritually restored, and endowed with a power that is not of this world.

Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Centre, 1982, sec. 51, p. 91

It also provides a forum within which the participants are educated in the essentials of responsible citizenship:

...considered in its local sphere alone there is much to thrill and amaze the heart. Here [the Feast] links the individual to the collective processes by which a society is built or restored. Here, for instance, the Feast is an arena of democracy at the very root of society, where the Local Spiritual Assembly and the members of the

community meet on common ground, where individuals are free to offer their gifts of thought, whether as new ideas or constructive criticism, to the building processes of an advancing civilisation. Thus it can be seen that aside from its spiritual significance, this common institution of the people combines an array of elemental social disciplines which educate its participants in the essentials of responsible citizenship.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh, 27 August 1989, in *The Nineteen Day Feast*, compilation of the Universal House of Justice (1989), pp. v-vii

PREPARATION OF AND FOR THE FEAST

Who hosts the Nineteen Day Feast?

It is the responsibility of the Local Spiritual Assembly to host the Nineteen Day Feast. The Universal House of Justice notes, however, that Local Spiritual Assemblies often call upon individuals to make the preparations:

Although the Local Spiritual Assembly is administratively responsible for the conduct of the Feast, it often calls upon an individual or a group of individuals to make preparations – a practice which is consonant with the spirit of hospitality so vital to the occasion. Such individuals can act as hosts and are sometimes concerned with the selection of the prayers and readings for the devotional portion; they may also attend to the social portion.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh, 27 August 1989, in *The Nineteen Day Feast*, compilation of the Universal House of Justice (1989), pp. v-vii

What are the responsibilities of the host?

Above all, as noted above, the host has a responsibility to provide hospitality to the friends:

...the Nineteen Day Feast...is ordained in the “Kitáb-i-Aqdas” in these words: “It hath been enjoined upon you once a month to offer hospitality, even should ye serve no more than water, for God hath willed to bind your hearts together, though it be through heavenly and earthly means combined”. It is clear, then, that the Feast is rooted in hospitality, with all its implications of friendliness, courtesy, service, generosity and conviviality.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh, 27 August 1989, in *The Nineteen Day Feast*, compilation of the Universal House of Justice (1989), pp.v-vii

The host, with complete self-effacement, showing kindness to all, must be a comfort to each one, and serve the friends with his own hands.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, from a Tablet to an individual believer – translated from the Persian, in *The Nineteen Day Feast*, compilation of the Universal House of Justice (1989), p. 1

The Universal House of Justice has also noted that

In small communities the aspect of personal hospitality is easy to carry out, but in large communities the Local Spiritual Assemblies, while retaining the concept of hospitality, may find it necessary to devise other measures.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh,

27 August 1989, in *The Nineteen Day Feast*, compilation of the Universal House of Justice (1989), pp. v-vii

What are some important aspects of the preparation for the Feast?

The Universal House of Justice has listed the following as being important aspects of the preparation for the Feast:

- *proper selection of readings*
- *the assignment, in advance, of good readers*
- *a sense of decorum both in the preparation and the reception of the devotional programme*
- *attention to the environment in which the Feast is to be held, whether indoors or outdoors*
- *cleanliness*
- *arrangement of the space in practical and decorative ways*
- *punctuality*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh, 27 August 1989, in *The Nineteen Day Feast*, compilation of the Universal House of Justice (1989), pp.v-vii

How should the believers prepare themselves for attending the Feast?

The believers should prepare themselves before entering the Feast by emptying their hearts of all else save God:

But when you present yourselves in the meetings, before entering them, free yourselves from all that you have in your heart, free your thoughts and your minds from all else save God, and speak to your heart ... so that you may be gathered together with the utmost love ... Each one of you must think how to make happy and pleased the other members of your Assembly, and each one must consider all those who are present as better and greater than himself, and each one must consider himself less than the rest. Know their station as high, and think of your own station as low...

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Star of the West*, vol. IV, no. 7 (13 July 1913), p. 120

May a Local Spiritual Assembly hold a joint Feast with another community?

There is no objection to two or more communities holding joint Feasts occasionally. This should not be done on a regular basis, however, as it does not fulfil the purpose of the Nineteen Day Feast in the strict sense:

With respect to your question asking whether a Local Spiritual Assembly may cancel its Nineteen Day Feast in order to attend Feast in another community the House of Justice advises that the Nineteen Day Feast should not be cancelled. However, there is no objection to two or more local communities holding a joint Nineteen Day Feast occasionally, although it is not proper to allow such joint Feasts to be held on a regular basis. If members of a community find that the plan to hold such a joint Feast would produce inconvenience to them, they should take the matter up with their Local Spiritual Assembly.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer,
26 April 1987

If a local community, under the direction of its Local Assembly, observes Nineteen Day Feasts regularly, and it occasionally has a joint Feast with one or more other communities, you may credit in your statistics each Assembly for having held its own Nineteen Day Feast. You, of course, realise that joint Feasts do not fulfil the purpose of the Nineteen Day Feast in its strict sense, and should not become a regular practice among the friends.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual
Assembly, 15 February 1982

A joint Feast cannot completely fulfil the functions of a Nineteen Day Feast because the Nineteen Day Feast is intended as an opportunity for the community to discuss local affairs and make recommendations to its Assembly. Clearly this cannot be done effectively during a combined Feast.

Who may call the Feast if the Local Spiritual Assembly is not exercising its responsibilities in this regard?

The Universal House of Justice has said that the assistants to the Auxiliary Boards may encourage believers to come together for the Feast, as an interim measure, in communities in which the Local Spiritual Assembly is not exercising its responsibilities in this regard. A Feast can only be an official administrative occasion, however, when there is a Local Spiritual Assembly to take charge of it.

Should groups and isolated believers observe the Nineteen Day Feast?

Yes. Groups and isolated believers are encouraged to hold their own Feasts, even though the Feast can only be an administrative occasion when there is a Local Spiritual Assembly to take charge of it:

In reply to your letter of November 8th we feel that all friends, whatever their circumstances, should be encouraged to observe the Nineteen Day Feast. Obviously it can only be an official administrative occasion where there is a Local Spiritual Assembly to take charge of it, present reports to the friends, and receive their recommendations. But groups, spontaneous gatherings of friends, and even isolated believers should certainly remember the day and say prayers together. In

the case of a group it may well hold the Feast in the manner in which a Local Spiritual Assembly would do so, recognising of course that it has no official administrative standing.

Letter written by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,
2 December 1968

Members of groups and isolated believers are also welcome to attend the Feast of a neighbouring community.

The Universal House of Justice has also noted:

Any Bahá'í, whether an isolated believer or a member of a local community or group, may convey his suggestions and recommendations to the National Spiritual Assembly at any time and thus take part in the consultative aspect of Bahá'í community life.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer,
23 July 1985

PROGRAMME

What are the three parts of the Feast programme?

The three parts of the Feast programme are:

- devotional
- administrative
- social

What does the devotional section involve?

The devotional section 'entails the recitation of prayers and reading from the Holy Texts'

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh, 27 August 1989, in *The Nineteen Day Feast*, compilation of the Universal House of Justice (1989), pp. v-vii

Prayers and meditations from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb and 'Abdu'l-Bahá may be read, chanted or sung during the devotional section of the Feast. They may be followed by readings from other Bahá'í Sacred Writings, Holy Scriptures of previous Dispensations and the writings of Shoghi Effendi:

...the Feast is opened with devotional readings, that is to say prayers and meditations, from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb and the Master. Following this passages may be read from other Tablets, from the Holy Scriptures of previous Dispensations, and from the writings of the Guardian. It is clear, however, that the beloved Guardian would not wish his own words to be read as part of an arranged devotional programme in which they would be interspersed among words of Holy Scripture. In other words, at the Nineteen Day Feast, where words of the Guardian are to be read they should follow any selections from the Scriptures and not be mixed with them. This does not mean, however, that subsequently in the Feast, any of these types of writing may not be read as suitable during the consultation.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to the Hands of the Cause of God, 25 August 1965; cited in a letter from the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 15 October 1972

Shoghi Effendi expressed a preference that the Bahá'ís read from their own Holy Writings rather than those of other Dispensations:

...he feels that although in principle there is certainly no reason why excerpts from other Sacred Scriptures should not be read in the Spiritual part of our Feasts, that as this is particularly an occasion when Bahá'ís get together to deepen their own spiritual life, it is, generally speaking, advisable for them to read from their own Holy Writings in the spiritual part of the Feast.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 18 February 1954

Is it permissible to use Shoghi Effendi's writings in the devotional part of the Feast?

Some of Shoghi Effendi's writings are suitable for the devotional part of the Feast, but others are not:

Concerning the permissibility of reading selections from the writings of the beloved Guardian at Nineteen Day Feasts in Persia: it is true, as you rightly point out, that the beloved Guardian in a letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States stated that only the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá should be read during the devotional part of the Nineteen Day Feast...

...it should be borne in mind that the Persian writings of Shoghi Effendi are unique in nature, and many of them, unlike his English letters and messages addressed to the western believers, are interspersed with supplications, prayers and homilies of a devotional character which are suitable for the spiritual part of Bahá'í Feasts.

Letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 15 October 1972

What does the administrative section involve?

The administrative section entails:

...a general meeting where the Local Spiritual Assembly reports its activities, plans and problems to the community, shares news and messages from the World Centre and the National Assembly, and receives the thoughts and recommendations of the friends through a process of consultation.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh, 27 August 1989, in *The Nineteen Day Feast*, compilation of the Universal House of Justice (1989), pp.v-vii

The administrative or consultative section of the Feast provides the chief opportunity the community has to discuss the affairs of the Cause and make recommendations to its Local and National Assemblies:

The chief opportunity which the friends have for discussion on administrative questions is during the Nineteen Day Feasts, at which time the members of the Assembly can meet with the body of the believers and discuss in common the affairs of the Cause, and suggest new policies and methods...

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 27 March 1938

... the Nineteen Day Feast ... besides its social and spiritual aspects, fulfils various administrative needs and requirements of the Community, chief among them being the need for open and constructive criticism and deliberation regarding the state of affairs within the local Bahá'í Community.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 13 December 1939

It is important to note that matters of a personal nature should not be brought up at the Feast. Also note that a Local Spiritual Assembly is not bound to pass on suggestions made by its community to the National Spiritual Assembly, but will do so at its own discretion.

Who conducts the administrative section of the Feast?

The administrative section of the Feast is chaired by a person appointed by the Local Spiritual Assembly. It is often the Chairman of the Assembly, but it can also be some other person appointed by the Assembly. This person should be an adult Bahá'í of voting age:

It would not be administratively proper for a Bahá'í youth under 21 years of age to act as Chairman of the Nineteen Day Feast. However, no great issue should be made of this as it is a purely minor matter.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 22 February 1984

How is the administrative section of the Feast organised?

If there is a report from the Local Spiritual Assembly Secretary and Treasurer, this is often presented at the beginning of this section of the Feast. The Chairman may then open the meeting for general discussion, during which time suggestions and recommendations can be made to the Assembly. The above is intended as a guide only, and is not a prescription for how this section must be organised.

What matters should the Assembly bring to the Feast for consultation?

The following might serve as useful check-list of items to consider in reflecting on what matters might be raised at the Feast:

- teaching activities and projects
- children's classes and junior youth activities
- training institute activities and study circles
- news of cluster events and activities
- international and national news received by the Assembly
- correspondence from the National Spiritual Assembly, the Regional Bahá'í Council, and their committees and agencies
- national communications already distributed via NEWS or UK Bahá'í

- the Fund
- actions of the Local Assembly in response to community recommendations from a previous Feast
- local committee activities
- other items of general interest to the community

But in considering what subjects to raise the following should be borne in mind:

...the administrative portion of the Feast should not be laborious or burdensome. It can become so because too many reports by too many local Bahá'í committees are presented at one Feast. Such reports could perhaps be conveyed in bulletins.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 28 August 1989

How does the community make recommendations to the Local Spiritual Assembly at the Feast?

Recommendations may be given to the Assembly after having been passed by a majority vote of the believers present, or they may simply be noted down during consultation. The Assembly is bound to consider formal recommendations made by the Feast to the Assembly:

If the friends at a Nineteen Day Feast agree with a recommendation, either unanimously or by a majority, it constitutes a recommendation from the Feast to the Assembly. On the other hand, if an individual believer makes a suggestion that other friends do not take up, it may still be considered by the Assembly...

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 27 July 1982

Only adult members of the community may vote on recommendations:

Bahá'í youth between the ages of 15 and 21 may certainly take part in discussions, and should be encouraged to do so, but they may not vote on recommendations to the Assembly until they are 21.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 16 September 1979

Visitors to the community may participate in the consultation, but they may not vote:

As to visitors to a Nineteen Day Feast, Bahá'ís from anywhere in the world should of course be warmly welcomed, and may take part in consultation. However, only members of the local community can vote on recommendations to the Local Spiritual Assembly.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 1 December 1968

It is for the Assembly to decide which method of accepting recommendations to adopt, based on the size and nature of its community. The important point is that the Assembly always seeks the advice of its community and keeps it informed of all its affairs:

As cited in Article IV of the By-Laws of a Local Spiritual Assembly, “While retaining the sacred right of final decision in all matters pertaining to the Bahá’í community, the Spiritual Assembly shall ever seek the advice and consultation of all members of the community, keep the community informed of all its affairs, and invite full and free discussion on the part of the community of all matters affecting the Faith.”

The actual voting on recommendations made at Nineteen Day Feasts to decide whether they should be forwarded to the Local Assembly is a secondary matter which may be left for decision by the Local Spiritual Assemblies themselves. It is not prohibited that the Local Assembly Secretary record suggestions made at Nineteen Day Feasts for consideration by the Assembly. The important point to keep in mind is the provision made in the By-Laws as mentioned above.

Memorandum written by the Universal House of Justice to the International Teaching Centre, 21 January 1982

Who records recommendations made at the Feast?

The Secretary of the Assembly or some other appointed representative of the Assembly records the recommendations and suggestions made in order to report these to the Local Spiritual Assembly for its consideration. Whatever action is taken by the Assembly is reported to the community at a later Nineteen Day Feast.

Does the Assembly have to read all communications received for the community, in full, at the Feast?

No. Listening to long letters at a Feast can be a tiring experience, especially for new believers and children. Other means should also be found for sharing information, e.g. through a local newsletter. The number and length of local committee reports at Feasts should likewise be restricted:

We note from reading your minutes that the enthusiasm of some of the new believers is being tested by the reading of long, wordy letters at Nineteen Day Feasts, and we think that something should be done about this. While it is important that the believers be informed about important messages from the Holy Land and other important items, it is true that the reading of messages at Nineteen Day Feasts can become a very boring and trying experience particularly for new believers not acquainted with many aspects of Bahá’í administration. We think you should consider other ways and means by which believers could be informed of vital and necessary information, such as through bulletins, institutes and other meetings.

Letter written by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 6 September 1971

The National Spiritual Assembly, Regional Bahá’í Council and their committees also have a responsibility not to overburden the Feast with too many items.

Should the Feast be conducted in a language other than English for the benefit of non-English speaking friends?

No. The Feast should be conducted in whatever is the conventional local language. There is no objection to some of the readings being in another language, or to non-English speaking friends having some separate gatherings of their own, conducted in their own

language; however, they should not expect official Bahá'í functions such as the Feast to be conducted in their own language:

The Nineteen Day Feasts and other official gatherings of the friends should be conducted in whatever is the conventional local language. This does not mean, of course, that at such gatherings some of the readings could not be in the language of the immigrants, or that if these friends wish, some classes and conferences may not be held and conducted in their own language for their benefit. The essential thing is to promote the integration of the immigrants into the community and avoid feelings of estrangement or disunity on account of language.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 14 March 1995

Translations may occur during the Feast, so long as they do not interfere with the programme:

There is no objection in principle to translation into the Persian language being provided at Feasts, but it should not interfere with the smooth running of the meeting; this may necessitate that the Persian-speaking friends sit together in such a way that the translation does not disturb others, and these friends should not feel offended if they are seated to one side of the main proceedings for this purpose.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 14 March 1995

It is inappropriate, however, to hold separate Feasts to accommodate different languages. The reason for holding one Feast in the local language is for the purpose of promoting the integration of newly-arrived friends into the Bahá'í community and to encourage fellowship between diverse components of the community:

...it would not be appropriate for you to segregate the believers who are unable to speak English in a Feast conducted in Persian. They would be deprived of the fellowship of a more diverse portion of the community, and their integration into the life and activities of the community would be retarded. Such a separation could also lead to other bilingual community members who speak Persian choosing to join the Persian-language Feast and could increase the sense of separation between the components of your community.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a Local Spiritual Assembly, 6 January 1998

What does the social section involve?

The social section of the Feast:

...involves the partaking of refreshments and engaging in other activities meant to foster fellowship in a culturally determined diversity of forms which do not violate principles of the Faith or the essential character of the Feast.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh, 27 August 1989, in *The Nineteen Day Feast*, compilation of the Universal House of Justice (1989), pp. v-vii

How much flexibility is permitted in the order of the Feast and the manner

of its celebration?

It is not permissible to change the order of the Feast; however, it is permissible for the believers to gather together for a meal or social activities beforehand if they wish (e.g. to welcome new believers), provided this does not take the place of the social section of the Feast itself:

Regarding changing the order of the Feast, it is clear from Shoghi Effendi's instructions that the Nineteen Day Feast programme should start with the spiritual part, and not with the social part, which includes refreshments, or breaking bread together... However, if it is found that some sort of association among the friends or the serving of food and refreshments will be helpful, if this takes place at the outset, there is no objection to this practice, provided it is clear that it is not part of the Feast.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer,
23 January 1985

We can understand the desire of some of the friends to provide a warm welcome at the Feasts to newly declared believers and particularly youth, and we see no objection to the Assembly giving a reception before the actual Feast to achieve this purpose. As the Feast is frequently held in the evening, the Assembly might consider it desirable to arrange for the believers to have a light evening meal together before the Feast is held or it could, for example, arrange for social activities of an appropriate kind while the friends are gathering prior to the actual commencement of the Nineteen Day Feast. This should not, however, take the place of the social part of the Feast itself.

Memorandum written by the Universal House of Justice to the Hands of the Cause residing in the Holy Land, 21 January 1973

Even though the observance of the Feast requires strict adherence to the threefold aspects in the sequence in which they have been defined, there is much room for variety in the total experience.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh,
27 August 1989, in *The Nineteen Day Feast*, compilation of the Universal House of Justice (1989), pp. v-vii

The Universal House of Justice has recommended ways in which Local Spiritual Assemblies may make the Nineteen Day Feast uplifting and enjoyable for its participants:

- *music may be introduced at various stages, including the devotional portion;*
- *'Abdu'l-Bahá recommends that eloquent, uplifting talks be given;*
- *originality and variety in expressions of hospitality are possible;*
- *the quality and range of the consultation are critical to the spirit of the occasion.*

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh,
27 August 1989, in *The Nineteen Day Feast*, compilation of the Universal House of Justice (1989), pp. v-vii

The effects of different cultures in all these respects are welcome factors which can lend the Feast a salutary diversity, representative of the unique characteristics of the various societies in which it is held, and therefore conducive to the upliftment and enjoyment of its participants.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh,

27 August 1989, in *The Nineteen Day Feast*, compilation of the Universal House of Justice (1989), pp. v-vii

In encouraging such cultural diversity the Local Spiritual Assembly

... must be watchful that the incorporation of such elements does not lead to a degeneration of the Feast as a uniquely Bahá'í institution and, particularly, that no objectionable customs and practices begin to creep into its observance.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 28 August 1989

What kind of music may be played at the Feast?

During the devotional portion of the Feast, songs may be used, whose words are from the Writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh or 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Instrumental music may be used also:

... songs whose words are the primary Writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh or 'Abdu'l-Bahá are all quite fitting for the devotional portion of the Feast. Indeed, the Persian chants are such songs, out of a different tradition; they are a way of giving music to the holy Word, and each person who chants does it in a way which mirrors his feeling and expression of the Words he is uttering. As for songs whose words are poetic and the composition of persons other than the Figures of the Faith, these may be desirable but in their proper place, for, as you know, "music is the language of the spirit."

Inasmuch as the spirit of our gathering is so much affected by the tone and quality of our worship, of our feeling and appreciation of the Word of God for this day, we would hope that you would encourage the most beautiful possible expression of the human spirits in your communities, through music among other modes of feeling.

Letter written by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 22 February 1971

With reference to your question regarding any limitations to the setting of Bahá'í Writings to music, we are to state that it is permissible to use selections from the Holy Writings as lyrics to be accompanied by musical compositions, and to repeat verses or words. A composer is free to determine the musical style, bearing in mind the spiritual obligation to treat the Sacred Texts with propriety, dignity and reverence.

From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 28 November 1990

Instrumental music may be used at the Bahá'í Feasts. There is no objection to showing appreciation by the clapping of hands.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 20 August 1956

May items be offered for sale during the Nineteen Day Feast?

This matter lies within the discretion of the Local Spiritual Assembly, bearing in mind that it is important not to lose sight of the principal purpose of holding the Feast, and that pressure should not be placed on the friends to participate in the purchase of articles offered for sale. The Universal House of Justice has expressed the preference that such sales not become routine and are not conducted as part of the programme of the Feast:

As to the sale of items during the Nineteen Day Feast, we leave this to your discretion, bearing in mind that the principal purpose of holding the Feast should not be diverted and that pressure should not be placed upon the friends to participate in the purchase of articles offered for sale. Neither should it become an habitual thing. It would be better if the sale was not conducted during the Feast itself, but held at a separate time before or after the Feast proper.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 1 April 1968

Is it permissible to smoke during a Feast?

It is certainly inadvisable:

In the case of Nineteen Day Feasts or meetings of Assemblies or committees, it is not right that friends who find smoking offensive should be made to endure it in Bahá'í meetings that they are required or expected to attend. If certain individuals feel that they must smoke, then arrangements, such as a break in the meeting, could be made for their convenience. It would, of course, be entirely inappropriate to smoke during the devotional part of a Feast, or at any other devotional gathering.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 4 March 1974

Do any of the sections of the Feast have any more importance than any other?

No. All are equally important and the Feast will be at its best when the three are properly balanced:

The significance of the Nineteen Day Feast is thus threefold. It is a gathering of a devotional, social and administrative importance. When these three features are all combined, this Feast can and will surely yield the best and the maximum of results.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 2 October 1935

ATTENDANCE

Who may attend the Nineteen Day Feast?

In general, only Bahá'ís may attend Feast, including Bahá'í visitors from other parts of the UK and abroad. Bahá'ís living in isolated or group areas are welcome to attend the Feast:

Any Bahá'í may attend a Feast – a local Bahá'í, a Bahá'í from out of town, certainly an isolated Bahá'í from the neighbourhood.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 27 May 1957

... Isolated believers and the members of groups may also, of course, attend the Nineteen Day Feasts of communities when they wish to.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 23 July 1985

Shoghi Effendi said that

[I]t is inconceivable and wholly inadmissible that any Bahá'í in a Community should be permitted to hold a Feast in their home and refuse admission to another believer.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 27 May
1957

The Local Spiritual Assembly must, if necessary, check the credentials of visiting Bahá'ís and may not admit to the Feast visitors who are not known to the Bahá'ís and cannot show current credentials.

Those who are not Bahá'ís should not be encouraged to attend the Nineteen Day Feast:

The Nineteen Day Feast is an institution of the Cause ... These Nineteen Day Feasts are for the Bahá'ís, and the Bahá'ís exclusively.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 28 May
1954

What about the attendance at Feast by Bahá'ís who are citizens of the People's Republic of China (PRC)?

The sensitive position of Bahá'ís from the People's Republic of China must be recognised. Bahá'ís from the PRC should be introduced to each other as Bahá'ís only if they are willing for this to be done; therefore, it is recommended that it be left up to the individual to decide whether to attend functions such as the Feast, or not.

May Bahá'ís without voting rights attend the Feast?

No. Bahá'ís without voting rights may not attend Bahá'í-only functions, such as the Feast.

Is attendance at the Feasts obligatory?

No, but it is highly desirable:

Attendance at Nineteen Day Feasts is not obligatory, but highly desirable, and effort should be made by the friends not to deprive themselves of this spiritual and communal rallying-point once in every Bahá'í month.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 23 December 1948

The Local Spiritual Assembly has a responsibility to encourage the friends to attend the Feast. However, there are no penalties for failure to attend the Feast:

In regard to the Nineteen Day Feasts, Shoghi Effendi is of the opinion that the believers should be impressed with the importance of attending these gatherings

...

No radical action, such as the expulsion of any believer from the community, should, however, be taken in case anyone fails to attend these Feasts. It is for every individual believer to realise what the Cause requires from him in this matter.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 22 December 1934

Why are non-Bahá'ís not encouraged to attend the Feast?

Non-Bahá'ís are not encouraged to attend because, although there is nothing secret about the Feast, it is essentially concerned with the domestic affairs of the Faith. As such, Bahá'ís should feel they have full freedom to express their views. It follows that the believers should not invite non-Bahá'ís to a Feast:

Regarding the Nineteen Day Feast, the principle universally applicable is that non-Bahá'ís are not invited to attend, and if you are asked about this you can explain that the nature of the Feast is essentially domestic and administrative. During the period of consultation the Bahá'ís should be able to enjoy perfect freedom to express their views on the work of the Cause, unembarrassed by the feeling that all they are saying is being heard by someone who has not accepted Bahá'u'lláh and who might thereby gain a very distorted picture of the Faith. It would also be very embarrassing for any sensitive non-Bahá'í to find himself plunged into the midst of a discussion of the detailed affairs of a Bahá'í community of which he is not a part. A non-Bahá'í who asks to be invited to a Feast will usually understand if this matter is explained to him.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer,
12 August 1981

It can be explained, in a friendly manner, that the Nineteen Day Feast is an entirely private religious and domestic occasion for the Bahá'í community when its internal affairs are discussed and its members meet for personal fellowship and worship. No great issue should be made of it for there is certainly nothing secret about the Feast but it is organised for Bahá'ís only.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 4 November 1976

What should be done if a non-Bahá'í comes uninvited to the Feast?

If visitors who are not Bahá'ís arrive at the Feast, they should be invited to join and the programme modified accordingly. They may join the devotional and social portions of the Feast, and the administrative portion should be modified such that discussion of any sensitive or problematic issues is kept for another occasion.

The House of Justice has decided that, in such instances, rather than eliminating the administrative portion completely or asking the visitors to withdraw, those conducting the programme can modify this part of the Feast to accommodate the guests. The sharing of local and national news and information about social events, as well as consultation on topics of general interest, such as the teaching work, service projects, the Fund, and so on, can take place as usual, while discussion of sensitive or problematic issues related to these or other topics can be set aside for another time when the friends can express themselves freely without being inhibited by the presence of visitors.

Letter to all National Spiritual Assemblies from the Department of the Secretariat of the Universal House of Justice, 17 May 2009

...if a non-Bahá'í does appear at a Nineteen Day Feast he should be made to feel welcome, but a Bahá'í should certainly not invite a non-Bahá'í to attend.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer,
23 January 1985

What if the Feast is held at the home of a Bahá'í with a non-Bahá'í

spouse?

As in the case of attendance by any friend of the Faith, the administrative programme should be modified such that the material is suitable for all those present.

As part of planning these occasions, careful thought must be given, on the one hand, to the requisites of hospitality and love, and, on the other, to those of confidentiality and unfettered discussion on important and sensitive subjects. The Local Assembly, in consultation with the believers who have such relatives, should endeavour to find a satisfactory way to resolve each situation that arises.

Letter to all National Spiritual Assemblies from the Department of the Secretariat of the Universal House of Justice, 17 May 2009

What should the Local Spiritual Assembly do if the administrative part of the Feast has to be postponed?

If the administrative part of the Feast, or sections of it, have to be postponed, the Local Spiritual Assembly may, at its discretion, arrange to hold this at another time during the Bahá'í month, or it may hold this section over until the next Feast:

It is not quite correct to say that a Nineteen Day Feast is changed into a Unity Feast as a result of the presence of non-Bahá'í. What can happen is that the consultative portion of the Feast has to be postponed...

If it is decided to postpone part or all of the consultative portion of the Feast, the House of Justice states that it is within the discretion of the Local Spiritual Assembly to decide whether another meeting should be held during the Bahá'í month to complete it, or whether it can be postponed until the following Nineteen Day Feast.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 5 September 1983

Should children of Bahá'í parents attend the Feast?

Yes:

Since children of Bahá'í parents are considered to be Bahá'ís, they are to be encouraged to attend all Feasts, there to share the reading of the Writings and prayers and be bathed in the spirit of the community. It is the hope of the House of Justice that every Feast will be a feast of love when the children will give and receive the tangible affection of the community and its individual members.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 20 September 1982

May children of non-Bahá'í parents attend Nineteen Day Feasts?

Yes, provided they consider themselves Bahá'ís and their parents agree:

Concerning your inquiry asking if children under 15 of non-Bahá'í parents could attend Nineteen Day Feasts or other events held exclusively for Bahá'ís when the children consider themselves as Bahá'ís, such children may be permitted to attend Bahá'í functions provided their parents have given their consent. This applies only, of course, to children under the age of 15 years.

Letter written by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,

May children of Bahá'í parents who have not re-affirmed at 15 still attend the Feast?

Such youth may continue to attend the Feast for a time. The Local Spiritual Assembly must judge how much time youth should be given to make up their minds to re-affirm and weigh the individual circumstances of each case. For further guidance about the enrolment of children and youth, please refer to the section from page 15 in the guidance notes on "Enrolments".

Who is primarily responsible for the behaviour of children at Feasts and other Bahá'í celebrations?

Good behaviour is expected, and children should learn to appreciate the bounty of being able to take part in Feasts and Holy Day celebrations. The parents are primarily responsible:

It is realised that some Bahá'í observances are lengthy and it is difficult for very small children to remain quiet for so long. In such cases one or other of the parents may have to miss part of the meeting in order to care for the child...

In any case, the House of Justice points out that parents are responsible for their children and should make them behave when they attend Bahá'í meetings. If children persist in creating a disturbance they should be taken out of the meeting. This is not merely to ensure the properly dignified conduct of Bahá'í meetings but is an aspect of the training of children in courtesy, consideration for others, reverence, and obedience to their parents.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 14 October 1982

A situation to be avoided is where parents stop coming to Bahá'í meetings because of their embarrassment about their children's behaviour, or where they stop bringing their children to these meetings. It is much better that the parents continue coming, with their children, and that the Local Spiritual Assembly and other members of the community help and encourage them to supervise and train their children.

Does the Local Spiritual Assembly have any responsibility for the behaviour of children?

Yes:

The Spiritual Assembly can also perhaps help the parents by providing for a children's observance, suited to their capacities, in a separate room during part of the community's observance. Attendance at the whole of the adult celebration thus becomes a sign of growing maturity and a distinction to be earned by good behaviour.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 14 October 1982

TIME AND PLACE

When should the Nineteen Day Feast be held?

Shoghi Effendi said:

The Bahá'í day starts and ends at sunset, and consequently the date of the celebration of Bahá'í feasts should be adjusted to conform to the Bahá'í calendar time.

Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p.56

Where possible, the Feast should be held on the first day of the Bahá'í month:

...the Nineteen Day Feast should be held, preferably, on the first day of the Bahá'í month, that is to say the Bahá'í day, beginning at sunset. If this is not possible for some good reason, then it may be held later, but it must fall within that same Bahá'í month and should be on the nearest possible date.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 4 December 1985

As long as the meeting begins before sunset it is considered to be held on the day which comes to an end with that sunset.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 23 June 1964

The Nineteen Day Feast should be held, preferably, on the first day of the Bahá'í month, that is to say, the Bahá'í day, beginning at sunset. If this is not possible for some good reason, for example, that it clashes with the regular date for a public meeting, then it may be held later, but it must fall within the same Bahá'í month and should be on the nearest possible date.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles, 8 August 1969

The Universal House of Justice also recognises that the amount of time the friends can devote to the Feast is often limited and, therefore, advises that it may be permissible to hold the Feast at some other time during the Bahá'í month, if this would enable more of the friends to attend:

While the House of Justice does not wish to de-emphasise the preference expressed by Shoghi Effendi that the Feast be held on the first day of the Bahá'í month, it feels that in instances of difficulty, where the friends would otherwise be unable to attend, the National Spiritual Assembly may point out to Local Assemblies that it is permissible to hold the Feast at another time within the Bahá'í month, such as on a weekend.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 28 August 1989

The Feast of 'Alá' may be celebrated on one of the intercalary days or during the month of fasting provided the friends abstain from food:

...relative to the last Nineteen Day Feast, Shoghi Effendi sees no objection if the friends choose to celebrate it on one of the intercalary days. They may also celebrate it during the month of fasting, provided they abstain from food.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 2 August 1929

If it is impossible to hold the Feast on the first day of the month, it is permissible to hold it on the preceding day:

Regarding the time for holding of the Nineteen Day Feasts and elections; the Guardian would advise your Assembly to urge the friends to hold such gatherings on the prescribed day before sunset. If impossible, then it is permissible to hold them on the preceding day...

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly, 24
December 1939

Bearing in mind the above points, the matter is left to the discretion of the Local Spiritual Assembly.

Where should the Nineteen Day Feast be held?

...[The] governing principle is that each local community should hold Nineteen Day Feasts within its own civil area.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly,
10 February 1986

It is for the Local Spiritual Assembly to decide where the Nineteen Day Feast should be held. Shoghi Effendi encouraged using the Hazíratu'l-Quds where possible:

The matter of where the Nineteen Day Feasts should be held is certainly one for the Spiritual Assembly to decide; but the Hazíratu'l-Quds seems the logical place on most occasions. Until the friends have a place of worship in ..., this building will also be used for devotional meetings, as well as for administrative purposes. If, under some circumstances, some special Feast is offered in the home of one of the believers, with the approval of the Spiritual Assembly, there can be no objection; but, generally speaking, he feels it is better to use the Hazíratu'l-Quds.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 18 February 1954

May Feasts be held out of doors?

Yes:

There is no objection to holding meetings in the open air as long as they are conducted with dignity.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 22 November 1941

List of names and dates of the Nineteen Day Feast:

Month	Arabic Name	Translation	First Days if Naw-Rúz is 20 March	First Days if Naw-Rúz is 21 March
1st	Bahá	Splendour	20 March	21 March
2nd	Jalál	Glory	8 April	9 April
3rd	Jamál	Beauty	27 April	28 April
4th	‘Azamat	Grandeur	16 May	17 May
5th	Núr	Light	4 June	5 June
6th	Raḥmat	Mercy	23 June	24 June
7th	Kalimát	Words	12 July	13 July
8th	Kamál	Perfection	31 July	1 August
9th	Asmá’	Names	19 August	20 August
10th	‘Izzat	Might	7 September	8 September
11th	Mashíyyat	Will	26 September	27 September
12th	‘Ilm	Knowledge	15 October	16 October
13th	Qudrat	Power	3 November	4 November
14th	Qawl	Speech	22 November	23 November
15th	Masá’il	Questions	11 December	12 December
16th	<u>Sh</u> araf	Honour	30 December	31 December
17th	Sultán	Sovereignty	18 January	19 January
18th	Mulk	Dominion	6 February	7 February
19th	‘Alá’	Loftiness	1 March	2 March

N.B. For the month of ‘Alá’ the Gregorian date is calculated from the Naw-Rúz **following** the month, not the one before.

Is it permissible for Local Spiritual Assemblies with very large communities to hold more than one Feast in different districts of the community?

Yes. Shoghi Effendi said:

Naturally, district Nineteen Day Feasts can be held where there are very many Bahá'ís in one city.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 31 March 1949

A letter from the Secretariat of The Universal House of Justice states:

Experience to date has demonstrated the salutary effect of decentralizing the Feast on the quality of participation, on bonds of fellowship, and on the overall process of growth.

Letter to all National Spiritual Assemblies from the Department of the Secretariat of the Universal House of Justice, 17 May 2009

The decision to decentralise the Feast should be taken by the Local Spiritual Assembly after careful consideration of the benefits:

While care should be taken to avoid instituting this practice precipitously when the number of believers in the entire city is relatively small, a Local Spiritual Assembly should not feel obliged to prolong the pattern of hosting a community-wide Feast if it is no longer propitious. Such a change may be required when limited time or facilities hamper the satisfactory observance of the three parts of the Feast in a single location, most notably the portion devoted to consultation on community affairs.

Letter to all National Spiritual Assemblies from the Department of the Secretariat of the Universal House of Justice, 17 May 2009

The Universal House of Justice has, in letters to several National Spiritual Assemblies, provided the following guidance regarding dividing up large Assembly areas for the Feast:

- it is essential that the overall unity of the community be preserved:

The tendency in metropolitan areas is towards segregation, and therefore the Local Assembly should be alert to prevent a similar pattern developing in Bahá'í meetings by reason of the location of the Feast.

Letter written by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 23 January 1967

Given the racial and social stratification of large cities, the Spiritual Assembly would also have to exert the utmost care not to allow the Bahá'í community of ... to become, in effect, racially or socially fragmented, even though one race or stratum of society may be dominant in a sub-unit of the city. One of the questions that should remain uppermost in the minds of the Assembly, the committees and the individual friends is how to uphold at all times, through their functions and deeds, the primary principle and goal of our Faith, namely, the unity of the human race.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 20 December 1987

- rigid boundaries should not be established for the different areas:

Difficulties of travelling to the Nineteen Day Feasts, and other occasions, which may be met in certain parishes can be overcome by your authorising the Local Assembly in such a parish to hold more than one Feast within its area. There is no need to establish rigid boundaries for such a purpose, and the friends should be allowed to attend the Feast in their parish most convenient to them...

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 14 January 1980

- it is important not to reinforce barriers which would segregate portions of the population in a particular area:

In many cities around the world, for instance, people have been segregated into areas according to various factors such as race, ethnicity, and economic conditions. A Local Assembly must be mindful that barriers entrenched in the wider population are not inadvertently perpetuated in the local Bahá'í community as a whole.

Letter to all National Spiritual Assemblies from the Department of the Secretariat of the Universal House of Justice, 17 May 2009

- it should be well understood that the overall jurisdiction for the Feasts lies with the Local Spiritual Assembly:

... every Feast in the area is a portion of the same Feast under the jurisdiction of the Local Spiritual Assembly.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 14 January 1980

The Local Assembly should be watchful that ... control by the Local Assembly is [not] dissipated by this practice.

Letter written by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 23 January 1967

A common set of materials for the administrative part of the Feast would generally be disseminated each Bahá'í month to every area designated to host a gathering, including any particular topics or questions that should be raised. The Assembly will also want to ensure that consultations in each area are fruitful and productive, that the views of the friends are brought to its attention, and that it responds to recommendations in a loving and constructive manner. To this end, it may decide to designate one or more friends to act on its behalf in chairing the gathering, recording the results of consultations, and receiving contributions to the Fund.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 14 January 1980

Although some believers may yearn for the enthusiasm generated by large community gatherings, this need can be met on other occasions arranged by the Assembly.

Letter to all National Spiritual Assemblies from the Department of the Secretariat of the Universal House of Justice, 17 May 2009

- the number of sub-units created should be kept to a minimum:

The sub-division of the city should be seen merely as an administrative necessity meant to serve the good of the whole community: in this sense, the Assembly should

guard strenuously against creating too many sub-units, contenting itself with the minimum action in this respect.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 20 December 1987

- any Local Spiritual Assembly considering taking this step should first consult the National Spiritual Assembly.

Is it permissible to hold the Feast on the premises of another religious organisation?

This is permissible provided it will not tend to identify the Faith with that religious organisation in the eyes of the public. The National Spiritual Assembly leaves the application of this principle to the discretion of the Local Spiritual Assembly.