

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

17 July 2013

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

A century and a half ago, Bahá'u'lláh departed His House in Baghdad for the Najíbíyyih Garden, where He would, for the first time, openly disclose His prophetic mission. He left behind Him an edifice of surpassing sacredness that had sheltered Him for seven years. This sanctified residence, to which the Blessed Beauty would never return, was styled by Him the "Most Great House"; designated, along with the House of the Báb in Shiraz, as the place of Bahá'í pilgrimage; and addressed, by the Supreme Pen, in these stirring words:

I testify that thou art the scene of His transcendent glory, His most holy habitation. Out of thee hath gone forth the Breath of the All-Glorious, a Breath that hath breathed over all created things, and filled with joy the breasts of the devout that dwell in the mansions of Paradise.

Yet, in His own lifetime, the House in Baghdad was subjected to mistreatment, and ownership of the building was temporarily wrested from His followers. Bahá'u'lláh foretold, in poignant terms, the further degradation that would befall His House.

This is not the first humiliation inflicted upon My House. In days gone by the hand of the oppressor hath heaped indignities upon it. Verily, it shall be so abased in the days to come as to cause tears to flow from every discerning eye. Thus have We unfolded to thee things hidden beyond the veil, inscrutable to all save God, the Almighty, the All-Praised.

Events over the last one hundred and fifty years have borne out that to which Bahá'u'lláh had thus alluded. The House in Baghdad was acquired for His use about twenty-five years after its construction, which is thought to have occurred in 1830. By the early 1900s, it had fallen into total disrepair. When conditions were propitious, 'Abdu'l-Bahá arranged for it to be fully rebuilt, from the foundation upwards. As this work was nearing completion, efforts to seize the building by those opposing the Faith intensified, culminating in a wholly spurious claim to ownership that was unjustly endorsed by the courts. Again, the Most Great House was taken from the Bahá'ís.

Over the years that followed, successive attempts were made by the believers, under the direction of Shoghi Effendi, to regain control of the property. The case was eventually taken up by the League of Nations, which plainly condemned the injustice done to the Bahá'í community, but even this brought about no redress. However, the confiscation of the Blessed House and the response of the friends did lead to another significant development, as Shoghi Effendi recounts in *God Passes By*:

Suffice it to say that, despite these interminable delays, protests and evasions, and the manifest failure of the Authorities concerned to implement the recommendations made by both the Council of the League and the Permanent Mandates Commission, the publicity achieved for the Faith by this memorable litigation, and the defence of its cause—the cause of truth and justice—by the world's highest tribunal, have been such as to excite the wonder of its friends and to fill with consternation its enemies.

Now is not the occasion to delve into the details of this "memorable litigation", but an extensive description has been set down by the Guardian in his peerless account of the first Bahá'í

century. We add only that, since that time, the Most Great House has not been in the possession of the Bahá'ís, having been turned into a Shí'ah religious endowment instead.

Owing to the highly delicate situation in Iraq over the last tumultuous decade, it was not possible for the friends to press their claim to this sacred property. Nevertheless, the institutions of the Faith in that country and individual believers remained vigilant regarding any developments bearing on the security of the Most Great House and took whatever measures were open to them to promote its protection and preservation. Iraqis themselves, although not generally aware of the special significance with which the property had been invested by Bahá'u'lláh, were not oblivious to its historical and architectural value. Only a year ago, the Department of Antiquities had published, in the official gazette of the government, a decree intended to guarantee the building against any action that might damage it, a decree that carried with it the force of the law. Indeed, as far back as the early 1980s the authorities had recognized the House to be a fine example of period architecture in Iraq, still in good condition, and had designated it as a heritage site.

Thus, it was with utter shock and desolating grief that the Bahá'ís in Baghdad discovered on 26 June that the "most holy habitation" of Bahá'u'lláh had been razed almost to the ground to make way for the construction of a mosque. It has now been confirmed that the work was undertaken without a legal permit. The destruction of the property, it emerges, had been planned for some time, but the largest part of the operation was carried out over just three days and nights, from 24 to 26 June, using heavy machinery. We understand that the Department of Antiquities, which had previously been preparing to renovate the property, is already taking steps to establish precisely what led to the demolition, to attempt to halt any construction on the same spot, and to bring to account those responsible.

In the world at large, it has become all too familiar for a blow of this severity, dealt to a hallowed site, to provoke an aggressive response. The Bahá'ís of Iraq, trained by the hand of the Abhá Beauty, will of course remain the embodiments of kindness and forbearance, hopeful of a just outcome. They are under no illusion as to the magnitude of the loss which they, on behalf of the worldwide Bahá'í community and beyond, are being forced to bear. But their eagerness to render service to their society will not be diminished by this calamity, nor will they be any less conscious of the pressing need for the whole of humanity to be acquainted with Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. On the contrary. To gain insight into what the Most Great House truly stands for—indeed, to understand better the transcendent meaning of pilgrimage to that holy edifice—one need only observe the response of Bahá'u'lláh's followers throughout the world to its destruction: high-mindedness, serenity, trust in God. Their primary focus is on opening the hearts to the implications of the message of the Blessed Beauty; events in Baghdad will only serve to heighten the sense of urgency with which this work is undertaken. At this time when the series of youth conferences, now commencing, is about to propel forward the current stage in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, we beseech the Almighty to graciously bestow upon the friends everywhere fortified resolve.

Bahá'u'lláh foresaw that the Most Great House would be subjected to terrible indignities, but He also stated that, no matter what adversities might arise, the Cause was divinely protected. Let every believer take heart. In a moving apostrophe addressed to that House, the Ancient Beauty asserted: "God hath, in the world of creation, adorned thee with the jewel of His remembrance. Such an ornament no man can, at any time, profane." He gave a promise, too, that, notwithstanding all that would befall the Blessed House, the future glory of that sanctified place was assured: "In the fullness of time, the Lord shall, by the power of truth, exalt it in the eyes of all men. He shall cause it to become the Standard of His Kingdom, the Shrine round which will circle the concourse of the faithful."

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

