

The Year of Patience

Not the end of the marriage, but the beginning of reconciliation

THE PURPOSE OF this article is to share some thoughts on the difficulties encountered within that cornerstone institution, which God has, as Bahá'u'lláh, in one of His Tablets states, made to be the “*fortress for well-being and salvation.*”(1) This, of course, is the institution of marriage.

Two important reasons gleaned from the Bahá'í writings will help in reducing the need for more detail in this article, particularly as the subject of marriage will be dealt with more exhaustively in future.

The first reason is a reminder of the supreme value laid upon marriage. For when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, implores: “*O Thou kind Lord! Make Thou this marriage to bring forth coral and pearls.*”(2) He is putting in a concise way what He more splendidly expressed elsewhere and in more detail, in the following excerpts:

- That among the people of Bahá, “*marriage must be a union of the body and of the spirit as well, for here both husband and wife are aglow with the same wine.*”(3)
- That “*when, therefore, the people of Bahá undertake to marry, the union must be a true relationship, ... so that throughout every phase of life, and in all the worlds of God, their union will endure; for this real oneness is a gleaming out of the love of God.*”(4)
- And therefore, “*In the same way, when any souls grow to be true believers, they will attain a spiritual relationship with one another, and show forth a tenderness which is not of this world. They will, all of them, become elated from a draught of divine love, and that union of theirs, that connection, will also abide forever.*”(5)

The second reason is to highlight the qualities and values which Bahá'ís are expected, or at least strongly encouraged, to adorn themselves with in their individual lives. The imperative need, therefore, is to regard:

- “*a chaste and holy life as no less essential a factor that must contribute its proper share to the strengthening and vitalization of the Bahá'í community...both in (its) individual capacities and as the responsible custodians of the interests of the Faith of Baha'u'lláh.*”(6)
- The need for the individuals to “*pause to examine themselves, scrutinize their conduct, and with characteristic resolution arise to purge the life of their community of every trace of moral laxity that might stain the name, or impair the integrity, of so holy and precious a Faith.*”(7)
- A chaste and holy life must, therefore, “*be made the controlling principle in the behaviour and conduct of all Bahá'ís, both in their social relations with the members of their own community, and in their contact with the world at large.*”(8)
- “*Such a chaste and holy life, (has) its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and cleanmindedness.*”(9)

It is thus clear that on the one hand Bahá'ís have a duty to strive to live up to the expectations described above, and on the other hand, marriage is shown to be not just the union of two individuals, but indeed a powerful institution which allows the individual to maintain that high level of personal and behavioural integrity. It is also an instrument that

maintain that high level of moral and behavioural integrity. It is also an instrument that weaves the fabric for a society in need of this integrity, a society in need of a demonstrable and integral mechanism that allows its elevation to new heights of moral and spiritual loftiness not witnessed as yet, and not possible without the wholehearted acceptance of the high ideals attached to the approach and conduct of marriage in the manner described in the excerpts above.

The Bahá'í marriage is based on two essential pre-requisites: “*agreement*” between the two partners, and “*consent*” of all living parents of both partners.(10) It is an expression of love and commitment, to Bahá'u'lláh and to each other. In spite of the difficulty in achieving the ideals described above, it is, nevertheless apparent in modern society, and indeed probably all Bahá'í societies, that there is a level of maturity and understanding of the value of the institution of marriage. Accordingly, marriage is entered upon with the solemnity, dignity and respect that it commands, topped up with the joy that it engenders and the hope that it is built upon.

Alas, these hopes and aspirations do become thwarted in some cases, and difficulties do arise and the couple may reach an irreconcilable situation. It is not the purpose of this article to delve into the reasons whereby that situation could arise, or the means of avoiding them. It is important, however, to recognise that divorce is, regrettably, an outcome that no society can claim to be devoid of, Bahá'í society included. It had been almost proscribed in Christianity,(11) made rather easier in Islam, and in the Bahá'í teachings, divorce is “*discouraged, deprecated and against the good pleasure of God.*”(12)

So, while “Divorce is strongly condemned in the Bahá'í Teachings,”(13) “it is permissible should antipathy or resentment develop between the marriage partners” but only “after the lapse of one full year.”(14) This year is termed the Year of Patience (YOP).

All this is probably common knowledge within the Bahá'í communities. The real questions arise when we delve further into the teachings to see the wisdom and the requirements during this YOP.

First and foremost, “*Shoghi Effendi affirms that both the husband and wife 'have equal right to ask for divorce' whenever either partner 'feels it absolutely essential to do so.'*”(15) But by the same token, in their coming back together: “*Both parties must be content; unless both are willing, reunion cannot take place.*”(16)

Second, and no less important: “*During this year of patience, the husband is obliged to provide for the financial support of his wife and children.*”(17)

Third: even when the decision is made to proceed with the divorce, the YOP is not automatically commenced. It is the duty of the couple to notify a Local or National Assembly.

Fourth: “*When a Spiritual Assembly receives an application for Bahá'í divorce its first duty is to try to reconcile the couple. If this is not possible, and the couple separate, further efforts at reconciliation should be made during the ensuing year.*”(18) To stress this point, the process is described further in another letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice as follows: “*The procedure, briefly, is that when a Spiritual Assembly receives an application for divorce its first duty is to try to reconcile the couple. When it determines that this is not possible, it should then set the date of the beginning of the year of waiting.*”(19)

In spite of all the emphasis on the preliminary phases that need to be gone through before the start of the YOP, the Guardian further emphasises that this essential and critical phase is to be entered upon by both partners with the full understanding and total commitment “to reconcile their differences.”(20)

Needless to say, the process of reconciliation is not easy. Couples can find themselves unable to reconcile, an unfortunate end result. When this happens, the divorce, sadly, will take place.

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However, it is important to appreciate that the YOP can be terminated, and the parties may withdraw their application for Bahá'í divorce at any time during the year of waiting.”(21) Entry into the YOP therefore is not a one way route to divorce. It is a period of reflection, prayers, and the continuation of the reconciliation process. The hope is that the couple use the separation as a means to concentrate their thoughts and allow emotions to settle. They should embark on a process for the development of a sincere desire to discover new pathways which would allow them to regain the “magic” that fired up the hearts of the two concerned in those early days when passion and hope ruled supreme. The couple may find that they are beginning to appreciate the “commonalities” between them. They would strive to find the ability to accommodate the differences between them, and may find that they had exaggerated what they had identified as “incompatibilities” that inevitably surface within any marriage. Resuming the union should assiduously be pursued. It is not a period of embarrassment or shame, and most notably, it is not a period that allows the notion within any of the partners that “going back is not an option”. Nevertheless, going back should not be for the wrong reasons. It is safe to say that “going back” should only be for valid genuine reasons and emotions, and not for “face saving”. Going back should never be thought of as capitulation or bowing to (peer or family) pressure. The YOP is when the best attempts should be made to reach the state of re-dedication to the original pledges upon which the union started in the first place.

Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh accepts that even in the YOP, the “*fragrance of affection*” could be “*renewed*.”(22) The couple could rejoin.

If however, renewed “*antipathy*” sets in and they separate again, the date of commencement should be re-calculated so that YOP extends for a clear whole year.

Are these principles applied?

Many of us are aware of cases of divorce within our communities, or even our own families. We are aware of divorces within society at large, and within our smaller Bahá'í communities. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: “*Formerly in Persia divorce was very easily obtained. Among the people of the past Dispensation a trifling matter would cause divorce. However, as the light of the Kingdom shone forth, souls were quickened by the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh, then they totally eschewed divorce.*”(23)

Moreover, the Guardian states: “There is no doubt about it that the believers in America, probably unconsciously influenced by the extremely lax morals prevalent and the flippant attitude towards divorce which seems to be increasingly prevailing, do not take divorce seriously enough and do not seem to grasp the fact that although Bahá'u'lláh has permitted it, He has only permitted it as a last resort and strongly condemns it.”(24) While these two statements reflect the situation within two distinctly different societies, they agree on one thing: that divorce, either because of tradition or laxity, can be taken lightly. In our western society, theorists (mainly so-called progressive socialists) come up with one reason after another to ease the concept of divorce on people’s minds, and to reinforce notions that make it the “preferred option”. This attitude is fast catching up throughout the world. It is an attitude that we Bahá'ís should not be drawn into.

It is significant that governments have started to see the value of a “cooling off” period for the couple to reflect, rethink, and possibly benefit from some advice or counselling. Some governments have even legislated for a period of six months to a year before the legal divorce is allowed. The UK has recently legislated for this, and even in the Islamic society of Tunisia, the government passed a similar law some years ago. Other governments are fast catching up. The value of such a period of reflection and reconsideration is thus accepted on principle. Non Bahá'í societies, however, may not appreciate, or benefit from, the spiritual teachings surrounding the YOP as described above, and may not have the wise and spiritually loaded scriptures that should let us value the institute of marriage as the bulwark and solid basis upon which a secure and stable society can be built, and within which children can grow in the secure surrounds of love, stability and spirituality.

It is sad to mention that many of the cases that come to our administrative bodies do not adhere to the above principles. Indeed, many would come to the Spiritual Assemblies at the final stages of the YOP. Not only that, but the Assemblies are often faced with a situation

where even the start of the YOP is not agreed upon or identified. Bahá'u'lláh safeguards against this by setting out “the criterion of justness” in making it necessary for two “just” witnesses to testify to the start of the YOP. It is not necessary for these witnesses to be Bahá'ís since “the testimony of all God’s servants, of whatever faith or creed, is acceptable before His Throne.”(25) However, “*in relation to the witnesses, The Universal House of Justice has clarified that in these days the duties of the witness in cases of divorce are performed by the Spiritual Assemblies.*”(26)

Many friends do not appreciate that separation must indeed be separation, physically and domestically. The couple must not be under one roof. And certainly there must not be any sexual intercourse: “*Sexual intercourse between husband and wife is forbidden during their year of patience, and whoso committeth this act must seek God’s forgiveness.*”(27) Bahá'u'lláh equates this to adultery, unless it is a sign of return to affection, amity and the cancellation of the YOP.

These are but some examples of how often the YOP is wasted simply because the couple and all those around them look at the mechanics of the YOP and not its wisdom. Separation of the couple may be understood. Sadly, often it is not always considered as a reason for soul searching, praying, and asking for help. Such help is best provided by a Spiritual Assembly, either directly or through an appointed representative or group. Family, friends and so-called do-gooders may sincerely wish to help, but the independence and unbiased input of the Spiritual Assembly as well as its prayers as a body, and its wisdom, all make that channel the preferred first “port of call”. The difficulty, very often, is that the couple do not overcome their inhibition and may lack real appreciation of the value of our administrative bodies and their pastoral and protective role within Bahá'í communities. That role is so valuable, and must be appreciated and tapped.

Nabil Mustapha

References:

1. Bahá'u'lláh: *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: Notes, p.205
2. 'Abdu'l-Bahá: *Bahá'í Prayers* (US), pp.104-107
3. 'Abdu'l-Bahá: *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp.117-118
4. *ibid.*
5. *ibid.*
6. Shoghi Effendi: *The Advent of Divine Justice*, pp.29-30
7. *ibid.*
8. *ibid.*
9. *ibid.*
10. “It hath been laid down in the Bayán that marriage is dependent upon the consent of both parties. Desiring to establish love, unity and harmony amidst Our servants, We have conditioned it, once the couple’s wish is known, upon the permission of their parents, lest enmity and rancour should arise amongst them.” (Bahá'u'lláh: *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p.42)
11. “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” *New Testament*: Matthew, Ch.19:6
12. *Compilation of Compilations*: Section 535, p.239
13. Bahá'u'lláh: *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: Notes, pp.210-211
14. *ibid.*
15. *ibid.*
16. Bahá'u'lláh: *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: Questions and Answers, p.113
17. Bahá'u'lláh: *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: Notes, pp.210-211
18. *Lights of Guidance*, Section 1319, p.395
19. *ibid.*, Section 1320, p.395
20. *ibid.*, Section 1311, p.394
21. Bahá'u'lláh: *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: Notes, pp.209-210
22. Bahá'u'lláh: *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: Questions and Answers, p.113
23. *Lights of Guidance*, Section 1306, p.391
24. *ibid.*, Section 1309, p.392
25. Bahá'u'lláh: *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: Notes, pp.209-211
26. *ibid.*
27. *ibid.*

