

SHINING LAMP

A Bahá'í who served humanity with radiance

Bahíyyih Khánum (1846–1932): The Greatest Holy Leaf

The blistering August sun beat down on the weary group of about 70 Bahá'í exiles, drifting on the Mediterranean Sea. A faint wind barely pushed their sails. It was 1868, and Bahíyyih Khánum was about 21 years old. After “eight hours of positive misery,” they reached the filthy prison-city of ‘Akká, Israel. They were marched through the streets, past a jeering crowd, to an old army barracks. Conditions were so foul that Bahíyyih fainted.

The Bahá'ís were crammed into two rooms. At first they had no fresh water, then only salty bread to eat. Bahíyyih and almost all of them fell ill, and three men died. Yet through these trials, Bahíyyih Khánum showed patience and unshakable hope. She had joined her father, Bahá'u'lláh, in exile since she was only six.* Their family was persecuted because officials wanted to stop the Bahá'í Faith. Bahíyyih cheerfully endured hardship and served everyone selflessly. Bahá'u'lláh called her the “Greatest Holy Leaf” and said she had “a station such as none other woman hath surpassed.”

Gentle Authority

In time, conditions eased, and the Bahá'ís moved to homes in the city. The people of ‘Akká came to respect the integrity of the Bahá'ís who followed the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to be just and kind to all.

When Bahá'u'lláh passed away in 1892, Bahíyyih was devastated, but she carried on. Bahá'u'lláh had appointed her brother, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, as head of the Faith. Bahíyyih faithfully supported him and managed his household. When visitors came from afar, she worked tirelessly to make them happy and comfortable.



Bahíyyih Khánum wrote, “Our unity and love must be such as to cause the peoples of the world to join hands in amity . . .”

One woman from the U.S. noted Bahíyyih’s “strong yet gentle quality of authority” and described her “deep understanding eyes shedding the light of the Love of God upon us.”

When ‘Abdu'l-Bahá traveled to the West from 1911–1913, he confidently trusted Bahíyyih to lead the Bahá'ís in the Holy Land—an impressive role at a time when women were not considered as capable as men. She met with officials, encouraged the community, and helped the

poor. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá called her “my honored and distinguished sister” and “the companion of my heart.”

Cheerful Heroine

In 1921, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá passed away. He had named his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, as Guardian of the Faith. Again Bahíyyih, despite her grief, was a pillar of strength. Shoghi Effendi said she was his “chief sustainer.” When he traveled, she led the growing, global Faith, corresponding with Bahá'ís around the world.

“It always cheers my heart,” she wrote, “to hear from the dear friends whose hearts are so full of love and devotion . . .” She said, “We can take no greater step toward the Heavenly Kingdom . . . than that of loving service to all mankind.”

On July 15, 1932, at age 86, Bahíyyih Khánum passed away. Shoghi Effendi mourned her deeply. For her lifelong efforts, Bahíyyih Khánum is considered the “outstanding heroine” of the Bahá'í Faith. Shoghi Effendi praised her “cheerfulness that no amount of sorrow could becloud” and her “saintly life . . . endowed with a celestial potency that few of the heroes of the past possessed.”