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9. My Traditional Heritage and My Envelope

Dedication to the Sacredness of the Bahá'í Fund Compiled by the National Spiritual Assembly of Azerbaijan

Giving to the Fund ... is a spiritual privilege, not open to those who have not accepted Bahá'u'lláh, of which no believer should deny himself. It is both a responsibility and a source of bounty.

—*The Universal House of Justice*

... under no circumstances the believers should accept financial help from non-Bahá'ís for use in connection with specific administrative activities of the Faith ... because the institutions which the Bahá'ís are gradually building are in the nature of gifts from Bahá'u'lláh to the world ...

—*Shoghi Effendi*

The last issue of *the Roaring Fountain* presented contribution to the Bahá'í Fund as a unique "spiritual privilege reserved for every Bahá'í." The word "privilege" was examined, and thoughts were offered on why contributions to the Bahá'í Fund may only come from "those who have accepted Bahá'u'lláh." Reading the Holy Writings on this "privilege reserved for every Bahá'í" should help one forge ahead on his spiritual journey to give generously and sacrificially in the path of God, but this is not always the case.

What are we afraid of? And where does this fear come from? Why do we Bahá'ís procrastinate when giving? What prevents us from being brave and generously discharging our wealth? In my case, something in my head whispered, “**Let's wait and see what happens! We can always give next time! Let's see if the Fund really needs the money, and then we can contribute!**” Such thoughts paralyzed me; my hands would not even reach into my pocket. I remember one year this paralysis held me still for 16 Bahá'í months, and before I knew it, our treasurer was talking about Naw-Rúz!

What were the psychological barriers that prevented me from embarking on this important spiritual journey in which we are assured of confirmation? Where did these barriers come from? My personal life? My emotions? My intellectualism? My culture? Did I inherit them from my ancestors? Obviously each of us need to reflect on our mental blocks and find out what can open our hearts to the privilege of the Fund.



Cultural and intellectual realism we inherit from our roots

Bahá'u'lláh has forever changed the definition of contributions in the path of God, as discussed in an earlier issue of *The Roaring Fountain*. Our forefathers were asked to “make contributions,” while we are asked to “make generous and sacrificial contributions.” This is a significant shift, which demonstrates our social evolution from childhood to adolescence. Those who have entered a relationship with Bahá'u'lláh in this new age should make every effort to free themselves from the traditions of the past and align themselves with the principles of this New World Order.



One of the psychological barriers that hinders the believers from being generous when contributing in the path of God is a traditional, “nezir box” mentality. Nezir means donation, charity, or alms. For centuries, mite boxes, saisen boxes, and other similar donation boxes have helped world religions collect contributions. During industrialization, the nations of the world developed regional markets, and agriculture gave way to manufacturing. The population began to receive income in banknotes, and the role of the nezir boxes became crucial. Nezir boxes in Azerbaijan have served the community well. For

centuries, our devoted brothers and sisters have visited their local religious institutions and dropped their contributions inside a box. But it has become a mindless tradition stripped of its original spiritual facets.

We, the Bahá'ís, honor the profound cultural heritage engraved on our hearts, but also arise to seek new frontiers in our spiritual journey. The root of the “nezir box” actually goes back to a more profound culture of “nezir offering.” In our forefathers’ time, those who desired to contribute in the path of God made a meaningful wish (niyyet) in their hearts, prepared an offering in the form of food or sweets, divided it into small portions, went around the neighborhood, knocked at every household, and in utmost humility offered the blessings to friends, family, the poor, and the sick.

During these “nezir offerings,” the giving family took days to prepare the food and distributed it in utmost elegance and grace, often wearing their best clothes. Sometimes the food was offered in beautiful silver plates that were artistically designed. While preparing the nezir, it was customary in Azerbaijan to recite the Holy Verses revealed by God. The elders continuously circled the cooking pot and quietly prayed. Every member of the giving family assisted, by offering time, labor, and possessions with a generous, sacrificial, and reverent attitude. Nazir offerings in Azerbaijan have always been multicultural, with offerings made to all alike—Muslim, Lezgi, Bahá’í, Kurd, Armenian, and Russian. The Azerbaijanis take their offerings from their heart to every household. What a beautiful practice this is, and how fortunate we are to have inherited such cultural delicacies from our forefathers. In reality what the family carries to their community is not food, but a humble testament to the love and generosity of God. Somehow I believe in my own heart that the philosophy behind our forefathers’ “nezir offerings” is akin to the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's advice regarding contributions in the path of God.



This type of nezir offering still exists in our culture, and everyone cherishes it, but people today are too busy and live too far from each other to organize food offerings. I consider myself fortunate to have been born and raised in a society where the nezir offering was the foundation of community's generosity and sacrifice. I can testify that I felt the love that the nezir offering brought to my house and to my heart. Should it be done with love, the nezir offering has the ability to bring out the best in us. It is a meaningful

and humble way of practicing generosity and triggers unity and harmony in the neighborhood. The moment the bell rang and the bowl was delivered, we excitedly ran to open the door. The giving family was radiant—humbly offering the tray, smiling, and wishing us to enjoy it. These memories still bring tears of joy to my face, even decades later.

Let every conscious Azerbaijani who has experienced nezir offerings take a moment to reflect on the nature of the exchange between the giving family and the receiving family. What is it about the exchange between the two that is different from dropping cash in a nezir box? The difference is simple: the offering captures the human heart in a profound spiritual display of love and generosity. Before an offering, people think deeply; people make a united effort; and people act out of devotion, not obligation.

When I hand my envelope to my Assembly treasurer, I embrace my forefathers' attitudes rooted in their nezir offering. I focus my attention on the meaningful exchange and the gesture of love, an attitude starkly different than that of mindlessly placing money into a box. Imagine if a family brought their leftover food to your house in the middle of the night and left it at the front gate. You wouldn't know who made the offering, nor would the offering seem sacrificial. Would it connect your heart with that of the contributor? When my neighbors brought the nezir offering to my house, we acknowledged their offerings; our loving interaction was reminiscent of the love we feel when we put our name on an envelope, hand it to the treasurer, and receive a receipt from the Assembly. With the right attitude, this can be a meaningful interaction with our Lord, our beloved.

All donations and contributions should be offered to the Treasurer of the Assembly ...

—Shoghi Effendi

‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote, in his own handwriting, acknowledgements to every contributor. Today, the Universal House of Justice issues letters of acknowledgment to every contributor from around the world. Therefore, there must be a significance to creating this connection between contributor and treasurer. It is true that writing our names on the envelope makes it easier for the treasurer to verify whether the contributor was indeed Bahá’í, but perhaps there is more to it. Perhaps one of the mysteries of divulging our names on the envelope is to add meaning to the experience for us—to create a more personal, meaningful interaction with our Lord.

There is no requirement that Fund boxes be included in Bahá’í centers; however, each Assembly is free to decide if a Fund box, in a dignified location under the supervision of the treasurer, is beneficial for the development of the community. On such occasions, written on the Fund box are clear instructions for how to contribute; when we follow them, we can contemplate and appreciate the sanctity of our offering. We can treat the contribution like a “nezir offering,” not a “nezir box.”

Even when we do contribution with the right attitude, another barrier is our shame. I never had an explanation for why I refrained from divulging my name on the envelope, even though God is clearly aware of my contributions. He says, *“Nothing ... can escape My knowledge.”* If I am completely honest with myself, however, I can identify a reason—my small contributions. I think I was worried that the treasurer would find out that I wasn’t giving much. This obviously should not be a barrier; however, as I went through my spiritual journey, I learned that my conscience did help teach me whether I was really being generous and sacrificial. No one in this world can ever tell a Bahá’í how much to give. Even parents cannot instruct their children, but our own conscience is a great guide..

Nothing whatsoever of all that hath been created in the heavens or on the earth can escape My knowledge, and I am the True One, the Knower of things unseen.

—Bahá'u'lláh

Even if I was able to successfully conceal my identity from the treasurer, I realized I could never conceal it from God, the All-Knowing. When I visited the Bahá'í World Centre on pilgrimage, I was given the honor of placing my forehead on the Most Holy Threshold of the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh. I had learned that the caretaker of the Shrine got up early in the morning to prepare bouquets of fresh roses and place rose petals on the Threshold where pilgrims placed their foreheads. The fragrances of the rose petals were breathtaking, and sometimes the pilgrims wanted to take them home with them; on occasion, the Shrine's caretaker would grace pilgrims with dried petals to put in the middle of their prayer books.

One day, a newlywed couple visited the Shrine and decided to bow their heads on the Threshold together to ask for blessings in their marriage. As the wife was deeply enraptured in prayers with her eyes closed, the husband noticed the beautiful rose petals; in utter humility and love for his Creator, he began to place a few petals inside his prayer book. When the wife opened her eyes and noticed her husband taking rose petals from the Most Holy Threshold, she gave him "the look"! Without hesitation, the husband began to delicately put the rose petals back. He realized the error of his ways. As human beings we believe if no one can see us, we have successfully concealed our identity and nezir boxes are designed to conceal our identity.

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—Bahá'u'lláh



The fear of God hath ever been a sure defence and a safe stronghold for all the peoples of the world. It is the chief cause of the protection of mankind, and the supreme instrument for its preservation. Indeed, there existeth in man a faculty which deterreth him from, and guardeth him against, whatever is unworthy and unseemly, and which is known as his sense of shame.

—Bahá'u'lláh

The next issue of *the Roaring Fountain* will discuss other aspects of our personal lives, emotions, intellectualism, and culture that create psychological blocks to participating in the Bahá'í Fund.



The Journey Continues...

Next Chapter: Traditions...

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