

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

BAHÁ'Í WORLD CENTRE

30 April 1987

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly-loved Friends,

This Riḍvân, after decades of unabated effort involving prolonged, delicate negotiations, the Government of the State of Israel and the Bahá'í World Centre signed an international agreement whose implications--spiritual, historical, and practical--are inestimable for the rapidly evolving World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.

Approved by unanimous vote of the Cabinet of the National Unity Government, the Agreement states as reasons for the Government's concurrence in it the "friendly relations between the Bahá'í world community and the State of Israel" and the "desire of the Government of Israel to give effect to this relationship, and to its recognition of the special status of the Bahá'í World Centre". These friendly relations trace their foundation to the inspired initiatives of 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself, particularly during the period following the Revolution of the Young Turks in 1908 when a general amnesty was effected for religious and political prisoners held under the old regime. The prestige acquired by the Faith through the dynamic force of the Master's unique spirit was demonstrated after His release from imprisonment in the actions He took to establish His residence in Haifa at the foot of Mount Carmel, to inter the sacred remains of the Báb in the mausoleum which had been erected by Him on the spot designated by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, and to travel extensively in the West. Subsequent to these travels, it was more conspicuously illustrated through the excellent relations He forged with high and low alike, the social impact of His liberal ministrations to the needs of the people in the Holy Land, and the conferring of a knighthood upon Him by the British Crown.

This legacy of prestige was evident in the recognition accorded Shoghi Effendi as Head of the Faith by the authorities of the British Mandate. The extent of the Guardian's energetic exertions to achieve recognition of the independent status of the Faith, whose permanent spiritual and administrative centres are in the Holy Land, is beyond the scope of this letter and must, in due time, be afforded full treatment in the work of future historians. Let it suffice to reaffirm here that what he was able to accomplish during the years of the Mandate, in securing custody of Bahá'í properties and in obtaining official protection of the Holy Places, recognition of the Bahá'í marriage certificate and of Bahá'í Holy Days, and relief from certain taxes, combined

to reflect a status for the Faith which was accepted by the new Government when the State of Israel was established in 1948. Writing on Shoghi Effendi's behalf to a National Spiritual Assembly on 30 May 1952, his secretary stated that "All the Bahá'í properties and imports are exempt from taxation and customs, and the status of the Faith as a religion, recognized". However, the letter pointed out that "At present, we are planning to clarify our legal position with the Government, and get it on a more concrete footing". It is precisely in fulfilling the need for such clarification and more concrete footing that the instrument recently signed in Jerusalem represents a distinctive stage in the relations of the Bahá'í World Centre with the Government of this country.

In a ceremony at the Foreign Ministry on 22 April 1987, the second day of Ridván, the Agreement, comprising an exchange of letters, was signed by Mr. Shimon Peres, Vice-Premier and Foreign Minister, on behalf of the Government of Israel, and Mr. Donald Barrett, Secretary-General of the Bahá'í International Community, on behalf of the Bahá'í World Centre, in the presence of other high-ranking government officials and Mr. Ronald Bates, Deputy Secretary-General of the Bahá'í International Community. Among its contents are the following statements of recognition:

The Government of Israel recognizes the members of the Bahá'í Faith as a recognized religious community in Israel in accordance with Article 2 of the Palestine Order in Council, 1922-1947, and confirms that the Bahá'í World Centre is the world spiritual and administrative centre of the Bahá'í world community and that the Universal House of Justice in Haifa is the Head of the Bahá'í Faith and its Supreme Institution in accordance with its Constitution.

The Government of Israel recognizes that the holiest places of the Bahá'í Faith, in accordance with the Bahá'í Sacred Scriptures, are located in Israel, and confirms that the Universal House of Justice is the Trustee of the Bahá'í International Community over the Holy Places of the Bahá'í Faith in Israel and over the Bahá'í endowments in Israel.

From such clearly stated recognition flow privileges and benefits befitting the spiritual and administrative centre of a world Faith. These provisions of the Agreement are defined in terms that are renewable or renegotiable at certain intervals, lending a flexibility and extension to the Agreement that are among its salient features. The Agreement can thus be regarded as the culmination of a series of preliminary measures of official recognition variously granted by sundry governmental authorities over a span of decades, now confirmed, amplified, extended, and defined in an instrument which places the operation of the Bahá'í World Centre on a solid basis in its relations with the Government of Israel and in its other external relations. It thus launches a new phase in the development of the administration of the Faith at its World Centre.

Of unusual importance--and fraught with implications for the future dealings of the Bahá'í community everywhere as the Faith passes through the stages of its evolution until its stature is fully acclaimed by the nations--is the nature of the final negotiations, which engaged our representatives in extensive consultations with highly-placed officials, and from which emerged the procedure for sealing the Agreement. For it is a singular fact that the representative of a sovereign government, in the person of its Vice-Premier and Foreign Minister, and the representative of what was justifiably acknowledged as the "world centre of a recognized international non-governmental organization" sat down together to sign an "International Agreement", the first such occurrence in the history of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh.

That this should have taken place in the Holy Land, to which only some 120 years ago the Founder of that Cause was banished as a prisoner, evokes in us feelings of wonderment and astonished joy. That the Government which was party to so unprecedented an act happens to be that of a people who have only recently returned, after many centuries of exile, to their homeland bespeaks a token of divine favour of incalculable spiritual and historical importance for the Jewish people.

Dear Friends, the Status Agreement now achieved makes an indelible mark on the Formative Age of our Faith, assuming a special place among the swiftly accumulating evidences of the divine confirmations which have thus far distinguished the opening period of the fourth epoch of that Age. These accompanying signs of God's abounding grace clearly include:

- The Conference of Continental Counsellors at the World Centre at the close of which on 2 January 1986 was announced the opening of the fourth epoch.
- The establishment in Jerusalem of an Office of Representation for the Bahá'í International Community to facilitate the relations of the World Centre with the Government of Israel.
- The successful conclusion of the Seven Year Plan, unforgettable for the stature the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh attained betokening its emergence from obscurity--an emergence resulting largely from the indescribable sacrifices of the beloved friends in Iran.
- The completion of the distribution of "The Promise of World Peace" to heads of state and the outstanding events associated with the promulgation of its contents.
- The launching of the Six Year Plan which incorporated the feature of planning involving the consultation of Continental Counsellors with National Spiritual Assemblies, and to a large extent, consultation at the grass roots of the national Bahá'í communities, leading to the choice of goals for their countries by these National Spiritual Assemblies.

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- The first visit of a head of government to the World Centre to consult with the Universal House of Justice on issues raised in its Peace Statement.
- The participation of Bahá'í publishers in an International Book Fair in the capital of the People's Republic of China.
- The dedication of the Mother Temple of the Indian sub-continent, an event which opened new opportunities for the Faith to be proclaimed in the Soviet Union, Eastern bloc countries, and China, and which has induced the visits of high-ranking officials from these and other countries to the Temple.
- The establishment in Liberia of the first Bahá'í radio station on the continent of Africa.
- The adoption of the design created by Mr. Ḥusayn Amánat for the complex of edifices remaining to be constructed on the Arc on Mount Carmel.

One practical and spiritually confirming effect of the signing of the Status Agreement is that it brings us within reach of the realization of the beloved Guardian's vision for the Arc on God's Holy Mountain. For with the Agreement in hand formidable obstacles to the execution of the Arc Project have been removed. The conjunction of the completion of the architect's design and the favourable action of the Government thus signals the ripeness of the time to pursue the obligation acutely felt by the entire Bahá'í world to bring to fruition, as soon as possible, the work begun by Shoghi Effendi in the erection of the Archives Building and carried forward in the completion four years ago of the Seat of the Universal House of Justice. The plans to be made and the material requirements for so extraordinary an undertaking will, of course, be communicated to the friends in due course. In the meantime, we are happy to announce that the architect of the Indian Temple, Mr. Fariburz Şahbá has been assigned the task of designing the Terraces to be situated below and above the Shrine of the Báb; he has also been appointed Project Manager to execute the design already adopted for the three remaining buildings on the Arc.

We rejoice to know that the entire company of Bahá'u'lláh's loved ones joins us in prayers of thanksgiving for the manifold blessings He is showering in such profusion on the humble efforts being made in His glorious Name.

The Universal House of Justice

