



3. My Poverty and My Envelope

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



... God does not ask from any soul except according to his ability. This contribution must come from all cities and villages from all the believers of God.... whosoever comes with one good act, God will give him tenfold. There is no doubt that the living Lord shall assist and confirm the generous soul. In brief, O ye friends of God, rest assured that in place of this contribution, your commerce, your agriculture and industries shall be blessed many times...

— 'Abdu'l-Bahá

In the last issue of *The Roaring Fountain*, the nature of sacrificial giving was briefly discussed. From the words of Shoghi Effendi and the beloved Universal House of Justice, we learned that sacrificial contributions to the Bahá'í Fund accelerate "*spiritual progress*", attract "*the confirmations of God*," and foster "*dignity and self-respect of the individuals and the community*." But, what about those Bahá'ís who have no means to contribute? What about the children, the youth, the students, the sick, the orphaned, and the unemployed? Surely, God understands our limitations!!

... Every Bahá'í, no matter how poor, must realize what a grave responsibility he has to shoulder in this connection, and should have confidence that his spiritual progress as a believer in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh will largely depend upon the measure in which he proves, in deeds, his readiness to support materially the Divine institutions of his Faith.

—Shoghi Effendi

The first time I read this passage I felt sorry for myself, because I realized that my spiritual progress was dependent on sacrificial offerings. At that time, I was a poor, young student living in an expensive city with no employment opportunities. Deep in my heart, I was certain that I was exempt from contributions to the Bahá'í Fund. After all, generous giving and philanthropy was reserved for the rich and the wealthy. I was so poor at that time that I used to walk every day at lunch from my school to the Vaqzal railway station on 28th-May Street to buy doner-kebab for one Nizami.



Nizami Ganjavi was a 12th-century poet from Azerbaijan. He is considered the greatest romantic epic poet. His heritage is widely appreciated in the world!



Doner Kebab



Railway Station, Vaqzal

Having read the above passage addressed to "every Bahá'í, no matter how poor," I began to evaluate my living conditions, mathematically, to prove to God that I was exempt from contributing to the Bahá'í Fund. I took a pen and paper to my room and listed my expenses and every item I owned. I noted that I often paid ten to fifteen Shirvans for designer jeans. I also had cellphones, a large selection of shoes, stylish winter coats, hats, shawls, and a variety of suits. I cut my hair twice a month at five Shirvans per cut. The list went on. As it grew to a third page, I realized that I had not been honest with myself; I had created excuses to claim exemption from giving to the Fund—or better said, deprive myself of divine confirmations. That night I fell into deep depression and self-blame. It would have been bad enough if someone else had deceived me, but to deceive my own self of confirmation, that was heartbreaking. The more I thought about my actions, the more depressed I became until one day, at a low point in my misery and despair, I came across a passage by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that relieved me of all anxiety.

... God does not ask from any soul except according to his ability.

—‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Contributing to the Bahá’í Fund is a privilege reserved for “every Bahá’í, no matter how poor,” and “according to his ability.” What a profound and thought-provoking statement. All these years, I had been comparing myself with the doctors, engineers, scientists, professors, and businessmen in my community and arbitrarily exempted myself from this unique privilege. If “God does not ask from any soul except according to his ability,” then all I had to do was measure my financial ability and make sacrificial contributions according to my own means.

This verse of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá saved me, both from suffering deep distress and from depriving myself of a privilege afforded by God. It made me reevaluate my lifestyle, and it changed my attitude towards life. I started to cut my hair every three weeks instead of every two, stopped competing with my friends to purchase the latest cellphones, and instead of buying new attire and shoes every month, I took my clothes to the dry-cleaners and polished my own shoes. I also began to eat better lunches and take care of my health. I walked whenever I could and saved the money to give to the Bahá’í Fund. During my walks, I often reflected about the benefits of sacrificing my time to serve the Cause.

I volunteered once a week at the Bahá’í center to wash the stairway and the floors. At one Feast, I finally became courageous enough to conquer my fear of poverty. I gave my envelope directly to the treasurer, without being embarrassed, and pledged to give regularly. I realized that if my Lord does not ask any soul except according to his ability, then why should I be ashamed. I had put five Shirvans in the envelope, which was a big sacrifice for me. Some of my best friends caught me placing the five Shirvan bill in the envelope, and they panicked and gave me hand signals: “That is not a one, it is a five!” But they did not need to warn me. I did not become poor, and Bahá’u’lláh, in His mysterious ways, always provided. I became happier and more generous with myself, with my family, my neighbors, my relatives, and my community. When I looked back years later did I realize that my whole outlook on life had changed.

Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellow men? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight.

—‘Abdu’l-Bahá



One Shirvan



Five Shirvan

During that period, an Azeri Bahá’í came to Baku from Italy. He was an older gentleman. One of his grandparents was from Baku and the other one from Tabriz. His family migrated to Europe when the Bolsheviks invaded Baku. He was a kind man and visited the old Bahá’í center every day. On one of these visits, as we were having tea, he spoke on the importance of universal participation in the Bahá’í Fund regardless of one’s financial situation. In those days, Azerbaijan was going through a difficult time. The war had just ended and close to 500,000 Azerbaijanis from Nagorno-Karabakh were displaced, with little resources to ensure their health, safety, and security. Jobs were scarce, factories were closed, agriculture,

commerce, and manufacturing were at a standstill. The gentleman from Italy spoke about sacrificial contributions and how they helped him develop spiritually.



The audience in the Bahá'í center on that day listened with wry smiles. They explained to the guest that he did not understand the realities of war and how our situations exempted us from contributing to the Fund. We were young, orphaned, single, newly-married, studying, jobless, bankrupted, pioneering, and serving on the Faith's institutions. We had an infinite number of reasons to postpone giving generously in the path of God. The guest compassionately listened and responded that wars, famine, marital status, employment, service to the Cause, and even pioneering have no connection with the call of God to each individual to give and to be generous for as long as we are aware of this:

... God does not ask from any soul except according to his ability.

—‘Abdu’l-Bahá

He used a humorous analogy to share his sentiments. The flute is a musical instrument that consists of a hollow piece of bamboo with openings on both ends, and it only sounds melodious if played from the top side. Depriving ourselves of the privilege of giving when "*God does not ask from any soul except according to his ability*" is like playing the flute from the bottom!

He said that even Bahá'u'lláh, during the most turbulent period of His ministry, was always ready to give sacrificially and generously. When Bahá'u'lláh entered the fortress of Akká, along with his companions in 1868, they were all transferred to the Most Great Prison and treated cruelly by the local authorities. They were denied food and water on the first few days, and soon after, three of Bahá'u'lláh's companions fell ill and died. The prison authorities demanded full cost of burial in advance. In utmost generosity, Bahá'u'lláh offered His only possession, an old prayer rug, to be auctioned at the market for the burial cost. He did not exempt Himself or wait for one of His 70 companions to gather money for burial.

In light of the difficulties during the Nogorno-Karabak war, our guest continued to discuss the challenges World War One had created for Palestine. When the lines of transportation were disrupted, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá used His farmlands to cultivate wheat for the people of Palestine, and organized a large group of Bahá'ís to work the land. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá donated the entire harvest to the local population in Haifa and Akká, who had not received wheat from the central government for months. He also trained local farmers to rotate crops and increase yield. This selflessness and generosity was noticed by the British government, who had taken over Palestine right after the Ottoman Empire, and they conferred upon ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the title of knighthood for His philanthropy. Thus, even in times of war, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did not abstain from contributing in the path of God.



'Abdu'l-Bahá's selfless farming and contributing His harvest to feed the people with utter generosity was recognized by the local government

Further, the gentleman from Italy asserted that while the friends would send funds to 'Abdu'l-Bahá as Center of the Covenant, He did not expect a right to the property of others. Both for personal expenses and for philanthropy, He used His own income.

It is enjoined upon everyone to manifest love towards the Aghsán [Bahá'u'lláh's family], but God hath not granted them any right to the property of others.

—Bahá'u'lláh

In order to be able to contribute in the path of God, 'Abdu'l-Bahá engaged in many enterprises and expended on Himself and His brethren from His earnings.

The best of men are they that earn a livelihood by their calling and spend upon themselves and upon their kindred for the love of God ...

—Bahá'u'lláh

'Abdu'l-Bahá learned how to weave during His years of incarceration with the Holy Family, and was also quite fond of farming and agriculture. He leased farmland in Palestine to plant and experiment in various seasons. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's foresight and innovation in farming started new trends. For instance, He trained a number of farmers to plant a type of eucalyptus tree with quinine in its bark; it combatted malaria, cooled the climate, and produced timber.

In addition to wheat and barley, He advised the farming community to grow chickpeas, lentils, broad beans, tomatoes, bananas, citrus fruits, pomegranate, apples, pears, and sweet corn, and to raise cattle, sheep, goats, and poultry. 'Abdu'l-Bahá introduced bananas by bringing a number of shoots from India, and He encouraged farmers to engage in crafts and small rural industries. Gradually, 'Abdu'l-Bahá established an effective learning program for the farmers, and it was these generous acts of philanthropy for the love of God that earned him the knighthood.

In 1911–1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá personally paid all of the expenses for Himself and for a large number of companions to travel to Europe and North America, and He did this while financing the construction of a house for His family on Seven Haparsim Street in Haifa. While traveling in the West for over two years, the friends offered lots of material wealth to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, but He lovingly refused and advised the friends that they give sacrificially in the path of God. The friends did and later built the House of Worship in Chicago.



'Abdu'l-Bahá took a number of guests with him to the West in 1912



'Abdu'l-Bahá saved income from farming to build a house on Haparsim Street around 1910

Our guest from Italy concluded his stories by saying that obviously 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not farm to become rich, as one could see from His modest lifestyle, but an abundance of wealth is the melody of the universe for those who plays the flute from the right side. Sacrificial giving must be noble for the outcome to be noble.

...God does not ask from any soul except according to his ability. ... whosoever comes with one good act, God will give him tenfold. There is no doubt that the living Lord shall assist and confirm the generous soul.

—'Abdu'l-Bahá

This is the Book of Generosity which hath been revealed by the King of Eternity. Whoso adorneth himself with this virtue hath distinguished himself and will be blessed by the All-Merciful from His exalted Kingdom of Glory.

—Bahá'u'lláh



The Journey Continues...

Next Chapter: Bahá'u'lláh's New World Order...

The Roaring Fountain Bulletins

Stories about the Fund

Fundraising Projects



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