

Bahá'í Burial Information



Created by Sandy Ventura Gordon

FORLORA INCORPORATED

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Dedicated in Loving Memory

to

Laura Deanne Bowe, our Loving Daughter,

and to my

Brave Dad!

INTRODUCTION

The following information is provided as a service to the Bahá'í community. Forlora was birthed from my own personal experience when my 26 year old daughter passed on.

In the midst of numbing shock, I had an inner longing to care for her body one last time. Although, currently it is not binding upon western Believers to shroud the body or place a burial ring upon the finger of the deceased, I made that personal choice in answer to my own inner spiritual voice. Unfortunately, not only did I not have any personal experience or information about the shrouding process, or the fabric options or how to cleanse the body, there was confusion pertaining to what was Bahá'í law. The awkwardness I experienced during the shrouding of her body remained implanted upon my mind for several years but was replaced with an inner call to address this life reality by providing what is needed when it is needed the most.

It was through this life event that Forlora was born. We all must travel along the path of leaving this world as well as losing someone who is deeply loved. With that being said, it is indeed sad that the majority of us avoid discussing, planning and acquiring information and materials for this major life event.

I have sought to answer in this resource manual the most common questions by providing information and Bahá'í quotations. As your questions are answered, may any fear you may have had regarding burial be dissipated and replaced with an inner peace.

Best wishes,

Sandy Ventura Gordon

1

Western Believers

“Therefore, it hath been ordained that the dead body should be treated with the utmost honour and respect.” (The Báb: Selections from the Writings of the Báb, p.95)

The Bahá'í funeral and preparation of the body for burial is, “extremely simple,” as admonished by Shoghi Effendi in Principles of Bahá'í Administration. It is important that, “rigid rituals and practices” not be instituted and “the utmost simplicity and flexibility should be observed.” The burial of your loved one is a solemn and sacred event with enormous significance and meaning and during this time, your grieving and stress may diminish your ability to think or make decisions. The following information is designed to simplify the process and assist you during the planning and preparing your loved one or friend for burial.

Requirements for Western Believers:

- The Body must be buried – not cremated
- The Prayer for the Dead is to be recited for a Bahá'í 15 and over.
- The body should not be transported more than an hours journey from the place of death.
- The body should not be embalmed, unless required by law

Prayer for the Departed

The Prayer for the Dead allows for a change of gender

O my God! This is Thy servant (Handmaiden) and the son (daughter) of Thy servant who hath believed in Thee and in Thy signs, and set his face towards Thee, wholly detached from all except Thee. Thou art, verily, of those who show mercy the most merciful.

Deal with him (her), O Thou Who forgivest the sins of men and concealest their faults, as beseemeth the heaven of Thy bounty and the ocean of Thy grace. Grant him (her) admission within the precincts of Thy transcendent mercy that was before the foundation of earth and heaven. There is no God but Thee, the Ever-Forgiving, the Most Generous.

Alláh-u-Abhá (once)

We all, verily, worship God (19 times)

Alláh-u-Abhá (once)

We all, verily, bow down before God (19 times)

Alláh-u-Abhá (once)

We all, verily, are devoted unto God (19 times)

Alláh-u-Abhá (once)

We all, verily, give praise unto God (19 times)

Alláh-u-Abhá (once)

We all, verily, yield thanks unto God (19 times)

Alláh-u-Abhá (once)

We all, verily, are patient in God (19 times)

All must stand while one person recites the prayer. It is not necessary to face the Qiblih (Bahji) while reciting the prayer.

Optional not Binding Laws for Western Believers

- Placing burial ring on the finger of a Bahá'í who has attained the age of 15 and over
- Washing the body and wrapping the body in a shroud of silk or cotton
- Placing the body in a coffin of stone, hard fine wood or crystal
- Body buried with the feet pointing toward Israel, (east)

Many Bahá'ís of the West are choosing to incorporate some of the burial practices required by the Iranian Believers (and others), as a voluntary, personal choice. We will briefly describe the above practices and elucidate upon them further in subsequent chapters.

Burial Ring

The Burial ring is placed on the finger of a Bahá'í who has attained the age of 15 and over. If there are circumstances in which it is impossible to place the ring upon the finger of the deceased, than it is permissible to place the ring in the coffin.

The burial ring inscription reads as follows: "I came forth from God, and return unto Him, detached from all save Him, holding fast to His Name, the Merciful, the Compassionate."

Preparing the Body

You may choose to wash the body yourself or have family, friends or loved ones assist or you may wish to have the funeral director wash the body. Most funeral homes are gracious and wish to accommodate and help you as you tend to the body, so don't hesitate to ask for their assistance. Some states have certain requirements such as wearing a mask and gloves, etc., these will be provided for you. It's important to adhere to safety standards to protect yourself from possible exposure to disease pathogens such as hepatitis, etc.

If you are preparing the body in a funeral home you may wish to bring your own shampoo, soap, washcloths and towels or you can use what is provided at the funeral home. Before you begin washing the body it is helpful to have your fabric already available and prepared. It is also highly recommended that you have 2 or more persons to assist in the washing and shrouding of the body.

If you are preparing the body at home it is helpful to gather all the needed materials before beginning to cleanse the body.

Washing the Body

- It's soothing to have music playing and/or have someone say prayers.
- Light candles if you wish.
- Cover private areas of the body with towels
- Begin by washing the hair and face. The funeral home will have a blow dryer for your use after the washing is complete
- Continue washing the body. It is helpful to have one person to lift and hold the extremity (arm & leg) while another person washes and rinses.
- When you have completed washing the front of the body you can gently roll the body to the side to cleanse the backside. If you need assistance please ask the funeral home to lend a hand.
- Once you have completed washing the backside of the body, before rolling them from their side to their back, dry off the table and the back of the body. This will prevent you from having to re-roll the body. Proceed to dry the rest of the body and then complete by drying their hair.
- Some people choose to anoint the body and this is the time to do so after all the washing and drying is complete.
- Place the burial ring on the finger or place it in the coffin at this time. (optional, not binding upon Western believers)
- Depending upon the method used to shroud the body will determine whether you place the fabric in the coffin or if you shroud the body while on the table. (shrouding the body is optional at this time for Western Believers)

Bahá'í Laws Summarized

Bahá'í Laws Binding upon Western Believers

- The Body must Be Buried – Not Cremated
- The Prayer for the Dead recited before Burial
- Body not to be transported more than one hours journey from place of death

Additional Laws Binding upon Bahá'ís from Iran and other countries in the Middle East

- The Body must Be Carefully Washed
- The Body is to be wrapped in a shroud of white silk or cotton
- Bahá'í Burial Ring placed upon the finger or in the coffin of adult Bahá'í (15 year and older)

Burial Summary

- Official Bahá'í Funeral Service for Believers Only
- Utmost Simplicity and Flexibility Should be Observed
- Prayer for the Dead to be Recited by One Believer before Burial
- Non-Bahá'ís Can be Present When Long Prayer for the Dead is Read
- Feet of the Dead Should be Turned Toward the Qiblah (Not binding on West)
- In Case of Death at Sea, Maritime Law is Applicable
- Should not Refuse to Bury Bahá'í Who Lost Voting Rights
- The Most Great Name or Ringstone Symbol Not Appropriate on Gravestones

Can use Quotations from the Teachings on Tombstones and Nine Pointed Star

2

Burial Quotes

“The funeral should be carried out in a simple and dignified manner that would be a credit to the community.” (Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated December 3, 1975, Lights of Guidance)

We hope that the following quotes, will answer any questions you may have about Bahá'í burial and funeral. The quotes are divided in titled segments so you can quickly and easily look for a quote that addresses your particular question and situation.

Cemetery Distance

“It is forbidden you to carry the body more than an hour’s distance from the town; bury it with tranquility and cheer in a nearby place. (Kitáb-i-Aqdas)

Question: Regarding the carrying of the dead where it is bidden that they should be buried within one hour’s distance, does this law apply to transportation both by land and sea, or is it otherwise?

Answer: The law applieth to transportation by land as well as by sea, whether it be an hour’s distance by boat or train. The purpose is the time-limit of one hour, no matter what means of conveyance is employed. However, the sooner the burial taketh place, the more fitting and preferable. (Questions and Answers – A supplement to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas)” (Bahá’u’lláh: Extracts on Bahá’í Burial, a compilation from the Universal House of Justice)

“Briefly the law for the burial of the dead states that it is forbidden to carry the body for more than one hour’s journey from the place of death; that the body should be wrapped in a shroud of silk or cotton, and on its finger should be placed a ring bearing the inscription “I came forth from God, and return unto Him, detached from all save Him, holding fast to His Name, the Merciful, the Compassionate”; and that the coffin should be of crystal, stone or hard fine wood. A specific “Prayer for the Dead” is ordained, to be said before internment. It has been explained by Abdu’l-Bahá and the Guardian that this law prohibits cremation of the dead. The formal Prayer and the ring are meant to be used for those who have attained the age of maturity.” (Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas)

*NOTE: View Laws Binding on the West

"We have been instructed by the Universal House of Justice to convey its reply to your enquiry of 20 June 1978 about the Bahá'í burial law concerning the one hour's travel from the place of death.

"The House of Justice advises that the place of death may be taken to be the city or town in which the believer passes away, and therefore the hour's journey may be calculated from the city limits to the place of burial. However, it should be borne in mind that the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's Law is to be buried near where one dies." (Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Ecuador, July 9 1978)

Bahá'í Cemeteries

"At the present time there are no definite regulations for preparing the Bahá'í cemeteries. However, in a Tablet of the Master's He emphasizes the need for the cemetery to have a beautiful outward appearance and states that the graves should not be joined together but that each one should have a flower bed around its four sides. He also indicates that it would be pleasing if a pool were located in the center of the cemetery and beautiful trees were planted around it as well as around the cemetery itself."

"In response to your question about acquiring land from the Government for the specific purpose of establishing a Bahá'í cemetery, the House of Justice advises that it is permissible for Bahá'ís to be granted by government authorities the ownership or use of land for this purpose." (From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Brazil, February 20, 1978)

Funeral Service

Official Bahá'í Funeral Service for Believers Only

"An official Bahá'í funeral service should only be given for a believer, but there is no objection to the reading of Bahá'í prayers or indeed to a Bahá'í conducting the funeral service of a non-Bahá'í, if this has been requested." (From letter written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, July 20, 1946 Lights of Guidance pg. 198)

Utmost Simplicity and Flexibility Should be Observed

"Regarding the Bahá'í funeral service: it is extremely simple, as it consists only of a congregational prayer to be read before burial...Your National Spiritual Assembly should take great care lest any uniform procedure or ritual in this matter be adopted or imposed upon the friends. The danger in this, as in some other cases regarding Bahá'í worship, is that a definite system or rigid rituals and practices be developed among the believers. The utmost simplicity and flexibility should be observed..." (From letter written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, January 10, 1936 Lights of Guidance pg 199)

Prayer for the Dead to be Recited by One Believer

"The prayer for the Dead is published in Prayers and Meditations. It is the only Bahá'í obligatory prayer which is to be recited in congregation; it is to be recited by one believer while all present stand. There is no requirements to face the Qiblah when reciting this prayer" (Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas)

Obligatory Prayer for the Dead

"We have your letter of 23 December, 1966 asking whether it is permissible to change the gender of the pronoun in Bahá'í prayers for the dead when the deceased person is a woman. "The prayer for the dead which is obligatory appears in "Prayers and Meditations". This prayer allows for a change in gender.

"Other prayers for the dead are optional, but if used they are to be used as revealed." (Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, January 17, 1967 Lights of Guidance pg 199)

Non-Bahá'í Can be Present When Long Prayer for the Dead is Read

"There is no objection whatsoever to non-Bahá'ís being present when the long prayer for the dead is read, as long as they respect our manner of reading it by rising and standing as the Bahá'ís do on this occasion. Nor, indeed, is there any objection to non-Bahá'ís being present during the reading of any Bahá'í prayer for the departed." (From letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, July 20, 1946 Lights of Guidance pg 199)

Burial

Face of the Dead Should be Turned Toward the Qiblah

"The dead should be buried with their face turned towards the Qiblah. There is also a congregational prayer to be recited. Besides this there is no other ceremony performed." (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, July 6, 1935 Lights of Guidance pg196)

In Case of Death at Sea, Maritime Law is Applicable – Burial on Land is Preferable

"The laws of burial as revealed by Bahá'u 'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas do not refer to the occurrence of death at sea. Until such time as the Universal House of Justice legislates on these matters, the friends when faced with such incidents should be guided by whatever civil or maritime law is applicable under the circumstances. Should land be reached, however, obviously the body must be buried on land in the nearest suitable place." (From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, quoted in a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of New Zealand, October 20, 1974)

"You should also advise all individual Bahá'ís who are in service that they should take whatever measures are necessary to see that Bahá'í Laws regarding burial are observed. Such individuals should also notify their families or next of kin about these laws and of their wish to be buried according to Bahá'í Law." (From the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, January 11, 1968 Lights of Guidance pg 196)

Should not Refuse to Bury Bahá'í Who Lost Voting Rights

"The Universal House of Justice has received your letter of 15 June 1984 asking whether it is permissible to bury non-Bahá'ís in a Bahá'í cemetery, and has asked us to convey the following to you. "It would not be right to refuse to bury in a Bahá'í cemetery one who has lost his voting rights. Furthermore, it is quite possible that non-Bahá'í relatives of the believers or others may be permitted to be buried in a Bahá'í cemetery. However, a deciding factor could be whether the area of land chosen for use as a Bahá'í cemetery would be large enough to permit burial of non-Bahá'ís. It is suggested that no hard and fast rules be adopted, but that each case be considered on its own merits." From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Assembly of Brazil, July 12, 1984 Lights of Guidance pg 198)

Cremation

The Inner Temple Beholdeth its Physical Frame

"As this physical frame is the throne of the inner temple, whatever occurs to the former is felt by the latter. In reality that which takes delight in joy or is saddened by pain is the inner temple of the body, not the body itself. Since this physical body is the throne whereon the inner temple is established, God hath ordained that the body be preserved to the extent possible, so that nothing that causeth repugnance may be experienced. The inner temple beholdeth its physical frame, which is its throne. Thus, if the latter is accorded respect, it is as if the former is the recipient. The converse is likewise true.

"Therefore, it hath been ordained that the dead body should be treated with the utmost honour and respect." (The Báb: Selections from the Writings of the Báb)

Body Formed Gradually, Must Decompose Gradually

"Be assured that your letter was not a bother to us. Indeed, we were happy to learn that in the autumn years of your physical life your soul was illumined by the eternal light shed upon the world by Bahá'u'lláh.

"Concerning your question about cremation, the Bahá'í Law stipulates burial. The instructions of Bahá'u'lláh contained in His Most Holy Book make this Law clear. Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf to an individual believer in 1955, comments that 'Abdu'l-Bahá...also explained that burial is natural and should be followed. The explanation of the Master referred to by Shoghi Effendi is found in Tablets revealed by Him. One of those published in the Star of the West, Volume XI, No. 19, page 317, from which we quote:

"Thy letter has been received. Due to scarcity of time, I write the answer briefly: The body of man, which has been formed gradually, must similarly be decomposed gradually. This is according to the real and natural order and Divine Law. If it had been better for it to be burned after death, in its very creation it would have been so planned that the body would automatically become ignited after death, be consumed and turned into ashes. But the divine order formulated by the heavenly ordinance is that after death, this body shall be transferred from one stage to another different from the preceding one, so that according to the relations which exist in the world, it may gradually combine and mix other elements, thus going through stages until it arrives in the vegetable kingdom, there turning into, plants and flowers, developing into trees of the highest paradise, becoming perfumed and attaining the beauty of colour."

"Cremation suppresses it speedily from attainment to these transformations, the elements becoming so quickly decomposed that transformation to these various stages is checked.

"When we realize that our physical bodies actually are composed of elements placed in the earth by their Creator, and which through the orderly processes of His Law are continually being used in the formation of beings, we can better understand the necessity for our physical bodies to be subjected to the gradual process of decomposition. As at the time of death, the real and eternal self of man, his soul, abandons its physical garment to soar in the realms of God, we may compare the body to a vehicle which has been used for its journey through earthly life and no longer needed once the destination has been reached." (Letter from the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, June 6, 1971 Lights of Guidance pp 201-202)

Headstone

The Most Great Name or Ringstone Symbol Not Appropriate on Gravestones

"Normally the building of structures or headstones on graves should be left to the family of the deceased, and all expenses should be covered by them.

"The use of the Most Great Name or the ringstone symbol on gravestones is not appropriate. In a letter dated September 17, 1971 to an individual believer we wrote the following:

"Concerning the questions you ask in your postscript, there is no specific ruling regarding the type of headstone that may be used at a grave site. However, regarding the inscription on a headstone, the beloved Guardian asked the believers not to use any form of the Greatest Name but a nine-pointed star may be used. Or, you may wish to have an appropriate text from the Sacred Writings inscribed on the headstone. The position of the body in the grave should be with the feet pointing toward the Qiblah, which is Bahjí in 'Akká." (Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Uganda, May 4, 1972 Lights of Guidance pg. 198)

Can use Quotations from the Teachings on Tombstones

"In regard to your question regarding the use of the Greatest Name on the Tombstones of Bahá'ís or non-Bahá'ís, the Guardian considers this too sacred to be placed in such a position in general use, and the friends should not use it on their tombstones. They can use quotations from the Teachings, if they wish to, but not the Greatest Name. Naturally, if anyone has already used it, it does not matter." (From letter written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, June 20, 1954 Lights of Guidance pg. 202)

Life after Death

Gifts and Good Deeds in Memory of Those Passed On

"The Master has told us that gifts and good deeds done in memory of those who have passed on, are most helpful to the development of their souls in the realms beyond...(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, December 10, 1952 Lights of Guidance pg. 204)

The Soul Will Continue to Ascend Through Many Worlds

"Concerning the future life what Bahá'u'lláh says is that the soul will continue to ascend through many worlds. What those worlds are and what their nature is we cannot know. The same way that the child in the matrix cannot know this world so we cannot know what the other world is going to be." (From letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, October 18 1932 Lights of Guidance pg. 204)

The Nature of the Soul After Death Can Never be Described

"...The honour with which the Hand of Mercy will invest the soul is such as no tongue can adequately reveal, nor any other earthly agency describe. Blessed is the soul which, at the hour of its separation from the body, is sanctified from the vain imaginings of the peoples of the world. Such a soul liveth and moveth in accordance with the Will of its Creator, and entereth the all-highest Paradise. The Maids of Heaven, inmates of the loftiest mansions, will circle around it, and the Prophets of God and His chosen ones will seek its companionship. With them that soul will freely converse, and will recount unto them that which it hath been made to endure in the path of God, the Lord of all worlds. If any man be told that which hath been ordained for such a soul in the worlds of God, the Lord of the throne on high and of earth below, his whole being will instantly blaze out in his great longing to attain that most exalted, that sanctified and resplendent station.The nature of the soul after death can never be described, nor is it meet and permissible to reveal its whole character to the eyes of men..." (Bahá'u'lláh: Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 1983 ed.)

Death Can lose its Sting

"In His Tablets Bahá'u'lláh says that were we able to comprehend the facilities that await us in the world to come, death would lose its sting: nay rather we would welcome it as a gate-way to a realm immeasurably higher and nobler than this home of suffering we call our earth. You should therefore think of their blessings and comfort yourself for your momentary separation. In time all of us will join our departed ones and share their joys." (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, January 13, 1932 Lights of Guidance pg 207)

Blessings of Other World

"Bahá'u'lláh says that were we to have the proper vision to see the blessings of the other world we would not bear to endure one more hour of existence upon the earth. The reason why we are deprived of that vision is because otherwise no one would care to remain and the whole fabric of society will be destroyed.

"Shoghi Effendi wishes you therefore to think of her blessings and rejoice in her happiness. Should we have true faith in the words of the prophets we would not fear death nor feel despondent over the passing of our loved ones." (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, October 22, 1932 Light of Guidance pp.207-208)

Souls Enter a State of Being far Nobler and More Beautiful

"...Such earnest souls, when they pass out of this life, enter a state of being far nobler and more beautiful than this one. We fear it only because it is unknown to us and we have little faith in the words of the Prophets who bring a true message of certainty from the realm of the spirit. We should face death with joy especially if our life upon this plane of existence has been full of good deeds." (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, December 31, 1932 Lights of Guidance pg.208)

The Journey of Spiritual Progress is Endless

"As we almost never attain any spiritual goal without seeing the next goal we must attain still beyond our reach, he urges you, who, have come so far already on the path of spirituality, not to fret about the distance you still have to cover! It is an indefinite journey, and, no doubt in the next world the soul is privileged to draw closer to God than is possible when bound on this physical plane." (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, March 3, 1955 Lights of Guidance pg.209)

What Happens to us After Death

"You ask an explanation of what happens to us after we leave this world: This is a question which none of the Prophets have ever answered in detail, for the very simple reason that you cannot convey to a person's mind something entirely different from everything they have ever experienced. 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave the wonderful example of the relation of this life to the next life being like the child in the womb; it develops eyes, ears, hands, feet, a tongue, and yet it has nothing to see or hear, it cannot walk or grasp things or speak; all these faculties it is developing for this world. If you tried to explain to an embryo what this world is like it could never understand – but it understands when it is born, and its faculties can be used. So we cannot picture our state in the next world. All we know is that our consciousness, our personality, endures in some new state, and that that world is as much better than this one as this one is better than the dark womb of our mother was..

"Our past is not the thing that matters so much in this world as what we intend to do with our future. The inestimable value of religion is that when a man is vitally connected with it, through a real and living belief in it and in the Prophet Who brought it, he receives a strength greater than his own which helps him to develop his good characteristics and overcome his bad ones. The whole purpose of religion is to change not only our thoughts but our acts; when we believe in God and His Prophet and His Teachings, we find we are growing, even though we perhaps thought ourselves incapable of growth and change! (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer,, October 3, 1943 Lights of Guidance pp.208-209)

Suicide

"Regarding the 'In Memoriam' section of Bahá'í News: although suicide is so strongly condemned in the teachings, it does not mean that a person has ceased to be a Bahá'í because he killed himself; he should, therefore, be mentioned, the same as other believers,(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, March 29, 1945 Lights of Guidance Pg.203)