

BAHÁ'Í BURIAL LAWS AND RELATED SUBJECTS

February 2017

I. Overview and Applicability of Bahá'í Burial Laws

In brief, the Bahá'í 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 interment. As affirmed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian, this law precludes cremation of the dead. The formal prayer and the ring are meant to be used for those who have attained the age of maturity, i.e. 15 years of age

(*The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*, note 149) [1]

For the burial of the dead, the only requirements now universally binding are to bury the body in a coffin (not to cremate it), not to carry it more than a distance of one hour's journey from the place of death, and to say the Prayer for the Dead if the deceased is a believer over the age of 15.

(From a document entitled "Laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas Not Yet Universally Applied", March 2016, approved by the Universal House of Justice) [2]

II. Preparation for Burial

Transport of the Deceased

It is forbidden you to transport the body of the deceased a greater distance than one hour's journey from the city; rather should it be interred, with radiance and serenity, in a nearby place.

(Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, paragraph 130) [3]

QUESTION: *Is the ordinance that the body of the deceased should be carried no greater distance than one hour's journey applicable to transport by both land and sea?*

ANSWER: This command applieth to distances by sea as well as by land, whether it is an hour by steamship or by rail; the intention is the hour's time, whatever the means of transport. The sooner the burial taketh place, however, the more fitting and acceptable will it be.

(Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*, Questions and Answers, number 16) [4]

The body may be conveyed by any means to a distance that can be covered in one hour's journey.

(From a letter dated 5 August 1949 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

[5]

The Universal 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.

(From a letter dated 20 February 1978 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

[6]

The Universal House of Justice has received your letter ... in which you ask for guidance in observing the law for the burial of the dead in cases where the graveyard is more than an hour's journey on foot from a village.

If alternative means of transport are not available or practicable in cases such as you mention, another possibility is for the Bahá'ís of such a village to acquire a graveyard nearer to the village so that it can be reached within one hour from the village limits. If no such solution is feasible the believers will just have to do their best for the present to keep the journey as short as possible.

(From a letter dated 21 September 1981 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

[7]

The words of the law, as they appear in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, are: "It is forbidden you to transport the body of the deceased a greater distance than one hour's journey from the city; rather should it be interred, with radiance and serenity, in a nearby place." The Research Department has been unable to locate any passage in the Writings giving specific reasons for this law, but if one bears in mind Bahá'u'lláh's purpose to unite mankind and to free it from many of the ritual observances and traditional practices which divide one people from another, one can perhaps obtain an understanding for the very simple and dignified burial laws that He has given us. In past centuries it has been a practice of various peoples to transport the bodies of the dead over long distances so that they could be buried either in the vicinity of a sacred place or in some other location of special significance for the deceased. The Bahá'í law abolishes such practices. It also emphasizes the unity of the world and recognizes the importance of the spirit as compared with the body. The body of the dead person is treated with reverence and dignity and, without undue delay, is consigned to the earth in a place near where the person dies. The soul, we know, continues to exist in a world that is exalted above the limitations of time and place.

(From a letter dated 23 November 1993 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[8]

Shrouding

The Lord hath decreed, moreover, that the deceased should be enfolded in five sheets of silk or cotton. For those whose means are limited a single sheet of either fabric will suffice.

(Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, paragraph 130) [9]

QUESTION: *Concerning the shrouding of the body of the deceased which is decreed to comprise five sheets: does the five refer to five cloths which were hitherto customarily used or to five full-length shrouds wrapped one around the other?*

ANSWER: The use of five cloths is intended.

(Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*, Questions and Answers, number 56) [10]

Concerning the shrouding of the body of a deceased believer, referred to in paragraph 130 of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, there is nothing in the Writings to define the manner in which the five pieces of shroud should be wrapped or to clarify other aspects of the shrouding, and at present, the House of Justice does not wish to legislate on this question.

(From a letter dated 15 April 2015 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [11]

With respect to your query whether or not the body of the deceased must be clothed before shrouding, in a letter dated 2 April 1955 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, it is stated: "The preparation for the body for burial is a careful washing, and placing in a shroud of white cloth, silk preferably." The Research Department at the World Centre has reported that, while this and other passages in the Bahá'í writings suggest that after the body is washed it should be shrouded and buried, to date no mention has been found as to whether or not clothing the body prior to shrouding is either allowed or prohibited. Although the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ordains that the body of a deceased believer be wrapped in a shroud, the details of this aspect of Bahá'í burial have not been laid down by the House of Justice, and the friends are free to use their discretion in the matter at this time. As to your question about the applicability of Bahá'í law related to shrouding, the shrouding of the body is not presently required of Western believers.

(From a letter dated 29 November 2016 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [12]

Burial Ring

The Lord hath decreed that the dead should be interred in coffins ... and that graven rings should be placed upon their fingers....

... If the following verse, which hath at this moment been sent down by God, be engraved upon the burial rings of both men and women, it shall be better for them; We, of a certainty, are the Supreme Ordainer: "I came forth from God, and return unto Him, detached from all save Him, holding fast to His Name, the Merciful, the Compassionate."

(Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, paragraphs 128-129) [13]

QUESTION: *Is the use of the burial ring enjoined exclusively for adults, or is it for minors as well?*

ANSWER: It is for adults only. The Prayer for the Dead is likewise for adults.
(Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*, Questions and Answers, number 70) [14]

There is no provision in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas determining the finger on which the burial ring should be placed.
(From a letter dated 13 March 1978 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [15]

The inscription to be engraved on burial rings is set out in the latter part of paragraph 129 of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. There are no provisions about the size of the ring or its composition.
(From a letter dated 18 May 1999 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [16]

Use of the shroud and burial ring are ordinances not yet applicable in the West, but the family of the deceased may choose to observe them.
(From a letter dated 7 December 2003 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [17]

Embalming, Public Laying-Out, and Burial Soon After Death

... Under the Bahá'í teachings it seems clear that the body is not to be embalmed.... The practice in the Orient is to bury the person within 24 hours of the time of death, sometimes even sooner, although there is no provision in the teachings as to the time limit.
(From a letter dated 2 April 1955 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) [18]

Bahá'u'lláh has advised that it is preferable for burial to take place as soon after death as possible. When circumstances do not permit interment of the body to occur very soon after passing, or when it is a requirement of civil law, the body may be embalmed, provided that the process used has the effect of temporarily retarding the natural decomposition for a period of short duration. However, the body should not be subjected to an embalming process which has the effect of preserving it without decomposition for a lengthy period; such processes often aim to preserve the body indefinitely.
(From a letter dated 17 June 1988 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [19]

... the Research Department has been unable to locate any texts specifically referring to a precise time after death within which a body is to be interred or to the question of a public laying-out. However, the Department points out that there are general indications. In "Questions and Answers", number 16, is the sentence: "The sooner the burial taketh place, however, the more fitting and acceptable will it be." It is also not permitted to embalm the remains for a long period. On the other hand, a person is permitted to leave his body for

scientific research, which would inevitably result in a longer period between death and ultimate burial. This would seem, therefore, to be a matter of some flexibility. In the Holy Land, burial normally takes place on the day of death or on the following day.

(From a letter dated 4 January 1994 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [20]

Coffin

The Lord hath decreed that the dead should be interred in coffins made of crystal, of hard, resistant stone, or of wood that is both fine and durable

(Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, paragraph 128) [21]

As you know, it is stated in paragraph 128 of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that “the dead should be interred in coffins made of crystal, of hard, resistant stone, or of wood that is both fine and durable”. In recent years, in situations in which the friends are unable to use these specific materials because they are not available at all in the location of the funeral, or could be obtained only at excessive cost, the House of Justice has referred to note 149 relating to this passage in the Most Holy Book indicating that “the spirit of the law is that coffins should be of as durable a material as possible” and that “for the present, the Bahá'ís are left free to make their own choices in this matter”. Materials that have been used under these provisions include concrete and pressed particle wood composite.

(From a letter dated 7 January 2002 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a Bahá'í couple) [22]

You have also mentioned the possibility of “green burial”, which is understood to be burial in a biodegradable cardboard casket or in no casket at all. The law of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, as stated in paragraph 128, that “the dead should be interred in coffins made of crystal, of hard, resistant stone, or of wood that is both fine and durable” is not applicable to believers in the West at this time. However, the spirit of the law is that coffins be used and that they should be composed of material as durable as possible. With this guidance, the believers are free to come to their own decision.

(From a letter dated 21 December 2011 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [23]

... although burial in a coffin is among the laws universally binding on believers, the law regarding the composition of the coffin is not currently applicable to believers in the West. Bahá'í law does not address the use of a grave liner; its use is left to the discretion of the family of the deceased, whose decision may be affected by civil law or the requirements of certain cemeteries. Even if a grave liner is used, the law of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas mandating that the dead be buried in a coffin must still be observed.

(From a letter dated 12 June 2016 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [24]

III. Prayer for the Dead, Funeral Service, and Burial

Prayer for the Dead and Funeral Service

In the Prayer for the Dead six specific passages have been sent down by God, the Revealer of Verses. Let one who is able to read recite that which hath been revealed to precede these passages; and as for him who is unable, God hath relieved him of this requirement.

(Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, paragraph 8) [25]

Save in the Prayer for the Dead, the practice of congregational prayer hath been annulled. He, of a truth, is the Ordainer, the All-Wise.

(Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, paragraph 12) [26]

QUESTION: *Concerning the Prayer for the Dead: should it precede or follow the interment? And is facing the Qiblih required?*

ANSWER: Recital of this prayer should precede interment; and as regards the Qiblih: "Whichever way ye turn, there is the face of God."¹

(Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*, Questions and Answers, number 85) [27]

The Bahá'í funeral service is marked by its dignity, simplicity and flexibility. The only requirement is that the Prayer for the Dead be read before burial. Other prayers and passages from the Writings may, of course, be included. The friends are encouraged to avoid adopting a uniform procedure lest it become a ritual.

The Prayer for the Dead is to be said when the deceased is 15 years of age or older. Bahá'u'lláh has clarified its recital should precede interment. Facing the Qiblih is not required, but the friends may choose to do so.

With respect to how the Prayer for the Dead is to be said, it is to be recited by one believer while all present stand and listen in silence. As indicated in note 11 in *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* and in recently published editions of Bahá'í prayer books, such as *Bahá'í Prayers: A Selection of Prayers Revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2002, 2011), the correct way of reciting the Prayer for the Dead is as follows: "Alláh-u-Abhá" is said once, then the first of the six verses, "We all, verily, worship God," is recited nineteen times. Then "Alláh-u-Abhá" is said again, followed by the second verse, which is recited nineteen times, and so on.

The Prayer for the Dead should be offered even if a believer has lost his or her administrative rights. Normally it would not be appropriate for a believer whose administrative rights have been suspended to be asked to read the Prayer for the Dead at a Bahá'í funeral service unless there are special reasons to do so, for example, if such a believer is a close relative of the deceased.

(From a response dated 3 March 2012 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice) [28]

¹ Qur'án 2:115

... for adult believers, a Bahá'í funeral consists of the recital of the Prayer for the Dead and may well include the offering of other prayers and Bahá'í Writings.

The conduct of the funeral service and the arrangements for the interment are usually handled by the relatives of the deceased, though the Spiritual Assembly has the responsibility for educating the believers in the essential requirements of the Bahá'í law of burial as presently applied and in courteously and tactfully drawing these requirements to the attention of the relatives if there is any indication that they may fail to observe them. While the Assembly plays a role in upholding Bahá'í burial laws, it does not necessarily have an extensive role in carrying out the funeral itself. Other than ensuring that the Prayer for the Dead is recited at the funeral, the Assembly offers support to the extent that the relatives of the deceased may require it. Unlike a Bahá'í marriage ceremony, a Bahá'í funeral is not a legal ceremony, so there is more flexibility in how it may be carried out and what part the Assembly may play in it.

The laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas are obviously binding only on Bahá'ís. Nevertheless, if there is a request for a Bahá'í funeral for an individual who was not a Bahá'í, the Bahá'í community should generally respond positively in honouring the deceased and serving his or her relatives. Through consultation, it can be ascertained to what degree the relatives of the non-Bahá'í desire to have Bahá'í law carried out. Some may wish only to have Bahá'í prayers and Writings recited as part of the funeral; others may also want the Prayer for the Dead to be read; and still others may ask that Bahá'í burial laws related to the preparation of the body of the deceased also be observed. Normally, it would be sufficient for one or a few believers known to the deceased's relatives to assist with the necessary arrangements, and the Assembly would not need to become involved, unless it were directly approached by the relatives.

(From a letter dated 22 April 2016 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

[29]

Burial in Graves, Vaults, and Mausoleums

The House of Justice sees no objection to the believers' following the custom which is normal in ..., namely that of placing the coffin directly in a grave dug in the earth and covering it with loose earth, rather than lining the grave with concrete or cement blocks. This is a matter that should be left entirely to the discretion of the family

(From a letter dated 29 July 1984 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

[30]

... the House of Justice has found no text relating to placing the coffin in a niche or on a shelf in a vault and since it does not wish to legislate on this matter at the present time, the friends will have to be guided by their consciences whenever the problem arises.

(From a letter dated 9 April 1986 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[31]

... in response to one National Spiritual Assembly in whose country the land available for cemeteries was very scarce, the House of Justice suggested that the Assembly might be able to acquire a small piece of land in each location where a cemetery is needed, on which a mausoleum consisting of many single burial vaults could be built. It was pointed out that

there would be no objection to the vaults' being on top of one another and that a small but attractive garden could be made around the building, in front of it, or even inside it.

(From a letter dated 15 June 2008 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [32]

There is no prohibition in Bahá'í law to burial in several levels of graves nor against the use of vaults above the level of the ground.

(From a letter dated 19 April 2016 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [33]

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter ... enquiring whether it is permissible under Bahá'í law for two bodies to be buried in the same grave....

The beloved Guardian has stated: "It is better and more appropriate to assign a grave for every dead person." However, the House of Justice advises that this expresses a preference and is not given as a binding ruling. The House of Justice has not legislated upon the question of what exactly constitutes a "grave", nor does it wish to legislate on such details of burial laws at this time. Individual friends are, therefore, free to use their own discretion in this matter at this time. Of course, when a Spiritual Assembly is faced with the question of whether more than one body should be buried in a grave, for example when the Assembly is establishing a cemetery, the decision would be left to the Assembly.

(From a letter dated 20 September 2016 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [34]

Burial of Body Facing the Qiblih

The dead should be buried with their faces turned towards the Qiblih.

(From a letter dated 6 July 1935 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) [35]

The position of the body in the grave should be with the feet pointing toward the Qiblih, which is Bahjí in 'Akká.

(From a letter dated 4 May 1972 written by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [36]

While it is not a binding requirement at present, eventually Bahá'ís in all countries will be buried facing the Qiblih (i.e., so that the feet of the body will point towards Bahjí), as is now done in the East. If you consider the direction that the face of such a body would assume if it were in an upright position, it should become clear that the two passages you refer to ... do not present a contradiction.²

(From a letter dated 13 September 1992 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [37]

² See extracts 35 and 36 for the two referenced passages

As regards Bahá'í burial, positioning the body such that the feet point toward the Qiblih (the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh in 'Akká) is not a universally binding requirement at the present time. No action should be taken concerning those whose remains have been interred with their bodies having a different orientation.

(From a letter dated 26 February 2006 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

[38]

IV. Related Subjects

Burial Instructions Contrary to Bahá'í Law or Relatives of the Deceased Opposing Application of Bahá'í Law

Obedience to the Bahá'í law of burial is a matter of education If a Bahá'í makes a provision either orally or in writing, that is contrary to Bahá'í law, that provision is null and void in Bahá'í law, and neither the Bahá'í relatives nor the Spiritual Assembly are permitted to fulfil it. Thus, if a Bahá'í states that his remains are to be cremated he should, nevertheless, be buried in accordance with Bahá'í law unless there is some element of the civil law that would prevent such an occurrence—in which case the civil law would have to be followed, but the Assembly, as indicated above, could take no part in it. There is, however, no objection to Bahá'ís attending the non-Bahá'í funeral service of a Bahá'í whose relatives have prevented the Bahá'í funeral from taking place. The Bahá'ís should endeavour to offer Bahá'í prayers for the progress of the soul of their departed friend, if circumstances permit. If that is not possible, the Spiritual Assembly could, if it seemed appropriate, arrange a meeting at a time other than the funeral, at which prayers, including the Prayer for the Dead, could be said on behalf of the deceased.

(From a letter dated 3 July 1986 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

[39]

There are a number of considerations pertinent to cases where non-Bahá'í family members may not understand the significance of Bahá'í burial laws. One is the legal question as to who has the authority to decide what is to be done with the body of the deceased. This may well vary from country to country, and the civil law does not always uphold the wishes of the deceased. It may not be possible, therefore, for a Bahá'í with non-Bahá'í relations to make certain what is to be done with his or her body when he or she dies. The believers will, of course, want to communicate to their family members their wishes to be buried according to Bahá'í burial laws. This may include leaving written instructions related to their burial. They will also wish to continue their efforts to educate their non-Bahá'í family members, in a kindly and loving manner, on the importance Bahá'ís attach to the laws of the Faith and help them acquire a deeper understanding of the spiritual significance of the Bahá'í precepts. The believers in your country should feel free to consult with, and engage the support of, the Bahá'í institutions in their efforts. If after the passing of a believer, non-Bahá'í family members choose not to comply with Bahá'í laws related to burial, no issue should be made of the matter.

(From a letter dated 14 February 2016 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

[40]

Cremation

He feels that, in view of what 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said against cremation, the believers should be strongly urged, as an act of faith, to make provisions against their remains being cremated. Bahá'u'lláh has laid down as a law, in the Aqdas, the manner of Bahá'í burial, and it is so beautiful, befitting and dignified, that no believer should deprive himself of it.

(From a letter dated 7 July 1947 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly)

[41]

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 was published in *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 with 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 color.

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 the journey through earthly life and is no longer needed once the destination has been reached.

(From a letter dated 6 June 1971 written by the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[42]

... the parents may be certain that they have done the right thing in ensuring that the body is respectfully buried. While there is no objection to having an autopsy performed on the body, a hospital policy of incinerating a naturally aborted foetus would not be in keeping with the Bahá'í law which prohibits cremation. Further details such as the service used for the

interment of the baby are left to the parents to decide as no special instructions have been found in the Writings in this regard.

(From a letter dated 16 April 2008 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

[43]

Individuals are free to donate their bodies to medical science. They should request that when the use of the body for this purpose concludes the remains not be cremated but, if feasible, interred within an hour's journey of the place of death or from the location where they are at the end of the medical process. It will be up to the prospective recipient medical institution to decide whether or not to accept such conditions, but if the institution is unable to honor the above conditions, it would still be permissible to donate one's body if a believer chooses to do so.

The friends are encouraged to discuss these matters with their families in order to ensure that their wishes regarding the disposition of their remains are carried out.

(From a letter dated 21 December 2014 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[44]

Gravestones

As regards your question: there is no reason why the word "Bahá'í" should not appear in the centre of a nine-pointed star on the tombstone of dear ..., but the ringstone emblem should not be used, nor the Greatest Name.

(From a letter dated 30 September 1955 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

[45]

... CONCERNING GRAVEMARKERS, IT IS PERMISSIBLE TO USE QUOTE FROM BAHÁ'I WRITINGS ON GRAVESTONE AND TO INCLUDE NAME OF AUTHOR.

(From a cable dated 30 October 1986 written by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

[46]

You state that in local government cemeteries there are legal restrictions on the size of tombstones, but that these restrictions do not apply in the Bahá'í cemetery which is private property, and you ask if there are any specifications Bahá'ís should follow in such a case. Normally, matters related to headstones on graves are for consideration by the Bahá'í institution which has jurisdiction over that cemetery. Generally, the decision as to the nature of the headstones, their size and design is left to the family of the deceased, but it will, of course, need to take into account any requirements or considerations that the Local or National Spiritual Assembly concerned may determine.

With regard to your query concerning guidance from the Writings, no texts have been found specifying requirements for the headstone or the type of superstructure on a grave. 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. If desired, an appropriate text from the Sacred Writings may be inscribed on the headstone.

(From a letter dated 3 March 2002 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[47]

Cemeteries

At the present time there are no definite regulations for preparing 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.

(From a letter dated 20 February 1978 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [48]

... in considering the layout of the new cemetery, you should bear in mind that, eventually, Bahá'ís will be buried facing the Qiblah of the Bahá'í world. Therefore, it would be desirable to align any future graves in such a way that the feet of the bodies will point towards Bahjí.

(From a letter dated 10 June 2013 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [49]

Exhumation and Reburial of Remains

In reply to your letter ... asking about transfer of the mortal remains of believers from their original graves, the Universal House of Justice instructs us to say that in Bahá'í law it is permitted to exhume and reinter mortal remains. The House of Justice feels, however, that every effort should be made to comply with the law of Bahá'u'lláh requiring the body to be buried not more than one hour's journey from the place of death.

As to the problem you foresee by the practice in ... of leasing graves on a thirty year or so basis, the House of Justice suggests that although there is no objection in principle to the transferring of remains when original graves are destroyed or otherwise disturbed, it might be wise to investigate the possibility of obtaining small plots of land as permanent Bahá'í cemeteries, or extending the leases of Bahá'í graves when the cemetery itself is not to be destroyed. In other words, if you can make arrangements not to disturb the remains once they have been interred it would be better, but if this does not prove possible, then you should do everything possible to ensure that the remains are not removed more than one hour's journey from the place of death, and that the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's law for burial to take place near the place of death is observed.

(From a letter dated 11 January 1979 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [50]

Bahá'í law does not rule out transferring the mortal remains into a smaller casket for reburial, so long as this is undertaken in a way which shows respect for the body.

(From a letter dated 29 February 1996 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [51]

... it is preferable not to disturb the remains of the deceased once they have been interred. However, when circumstances demand, it is permitted in Bahá'í law to exhume and reinter mortal remains. This is usually done only out of absolute necessity in circumstances beyond one's control, such as when required by law. It appears that this is not the case in the present situation, which is understood to involve a family's desire to relocate the remains of

the mother from their resting place of nearly three decades in an alcove in a public cemetery to a grave in the grounds of a private cemetery. In instances such as this one, the House of Justice feels that it would be best not to exhume and relocate the remains in the manner suggested.

(From a letter dated 23 September 2012 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [52]

It is preferable, of course, not to disturb the remains of the deceased once they have been interred. However, in some localities disinterment may be required by law or the payment of a fee may be necessary in order for the grave to be maintained. Whenever the problem of the obliteration of a grave arises, it is left to individual families to take whatever action they feel is within their means. In cases where there are no family members, it would not be feasible for the Bahá'í community to maintain the graves, although there may be special circumstances that would require it to do so. In places where land is scarce and it is the common practice of the authorities to obliterate graves that are not privately maintained, the only solution may be to acquire land for a Bahá'í cemetery. Even though making provision for such cemeteries may not currently be financially feasible, it is a course of action that many Local and National Spiritual Assemblies will have to take in future and that will then make it possible to exhume and reinter the remains of the believers as the need arises. For now, it is left to the friends and their families to do the best they can with the resources available to them and within the circumstances presented by their society.

(From a letter dated 25 September 2014 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [53]

... if it is optional, it would be more appropriate for the remains to be reburied in a separate grave and not in a common grave.

(From a letter dated 2 November 2014 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [54]