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The Baha'i Festival of Ridvan
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Followers of the Baha'i religion around the world celebrate the festival of Ridvan from April 21-May 2. This is the holiest time of the Baha'i calendar, commemorating the time when Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Baha'i faith, revealed himself as God's messenger. The steps by which this revelation took place illustrate the birth of a new religion.

The process began in 1844 in Iran, when a charismatic young teacher called the Bab (a name which means "The Gate") began proclaiming the coming of a great messenger from God, the Promised One of all religions. During his six-year ministry, the Bab called on the people of Persia to purify themselves in preparation for the arrival of this messenger, called, "He whom God shall make manifest." The Shiite Moslem authorities saw the Bab's message as heresy and he was publically executed in 1850.

Baha'u'llah, one of the Bab's foremost followers, was imprisoned in 1853 as part of the government and orthodox religious effort to suppress the Babi movement. While in prison, he experienced a revelation from God in which he learned that he was the Promised One predicted by the Bab. But upon his release from prison a few months later, and for 10 years after, he told no one of this experience. Even so, Baha'u'llah's character, wisdom, and deep spiritual insight affected many people. His growing influence prompted the Islamic authorities to seek to prevent the spread of the new teachings.

In 1863, Baha'u'llah had gone into exile in Baghdad when he received orders from the Turkish government that he and his family were to be further exiled to Istanbul. The press of people who came to visit Baha'u'llah before he left Baghdad led him to take up residence in a garden outside the city, a place that has since become known to Baha'is as the Garden of Ridvan. During that time,

Baha'u'llah declared to his companions gathered in the garden that he was the divine messenger about whom the Bab had spoken. "This is the day," Baha'u'llah wrote, "in which mankind can see the Face, and hear the Voice, of the Promised One." The profound spiritual import of that declaration echoes in the name of the garden where it was made Ridvan, which means "Paradise." The festival of Ridvan celebrates this sacred event.

Today, Baha'u'llah's teachings provide the basis for the Baha'i Faith, which has grown to nearly two million followers around the world (<http://www.bahai.org>). Baha'is believe in one transcendent God, who out love for humanity has sent messengers to provide spiritual guidance for individuals and societies. All the world's religions were established by these divine messengers. All religions are thus united in essence, Baha'is believe, forming successive stages in a never-ending cycle of progressive revelation. Although outwardly they appear to differ, all teach the same basic truths. Their apparent differences derive from the differing requirements and capacities of the people at the time they were revealed. Baha'u'llah wrote, "Know thou assuredly that the essence of all the Prophets of God is one and the Same." Baha'is accept Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Krishna, the Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, the Bab and Baha'u'llah as messengers of God. While recognizing the sacred truth of all these religious teachers, the Baha'i religion constitutes an independent faith established by Baha'u'llah, one which envisions further communication between God and humankind.

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