

Answering difficult questions

The opening of the Terraces will generate many questions about why the Bahá'í community undertook this extraordinary project. We should welcome challenging inquiries because they provide us with the opportunity to convey the deeper implications of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Difficult questions, and the subsequent search for answers, often serve to clarify and refine our thinking.

There are a few essential points to remember when attempting to answer difficult questions. Everything about the Faith, from the significance of the number nine to the workings of the Bahá'í administrative system to laws concerning personal behavior, is informed by certain overarching spiritual principles that do not lend themselves to easy analysis or simplistic responses.

Yet simple, succinct answers are exactly what will be asked of us. Bearing in mind that a reporter wants a quick, ten-second “sound bite” or a one-sentence quote for a print article, we must not be rushed in our responses, or take shortcuts where we know that none exist. A “yes” or “no” answer on a delicate or controversial topic can create false impressions. We should also take care not to come across as dogmatic.

Even when we try to provide fuller explanations of a Bahá'í position, reporters may not like or agree with our answers. In such circumstances, it is important to communicate confidence and not be apologetic. We should not allow ourselves to be shaken nor try to win an argument. Instead we should endeavor to share our thinking about a particular issue. A key point is that there is a spiritual worldview that animates the Bahá'í understanding of life.

We should avoid appearing defensive or using phrases like “no comment” to avoid answering a question. It is also important to recognize that on many issues the Bahá'í community simply has no position. We can feel perfectly justified in saying, “The Bahá'í Faith does not take a position on ...” rather than feeling pressured to say something. If you do not know the answer to a question, or you are unsure of the appropriate answer, tell the reporter that you will find out and get back to him or her. You can then consult with your National Spiritual Assembly or with the Bahá'í International Community's Office of Public Information.

What are some of the qualities that should guide our interactions with the media?

- *Patience* – especially when confronted by a skeptical questioner or even a veiled attack – attacks are inevitable and invariably blessings in disguise, but must be handled very carefully.
- *Wisdom and tact* – don't over-explain or suffocate the questioner, and avoid entanglement with political questions.
- *Courtesy and encouragement* – everyone needs encouragement!
- *Sincerity, truthfulness, fidelity* – follow through on commitments and promises.
- *Integrity* – be true to Bahá'í principles in your dealings with the media.
- *Fairness* – acknowledge the legitimacy and reasonableness of a particular question regardless of how challenging it might be.

Finally, it should be recognized that our efforts to tell our story will in many cases be greeted by indifference. We should strive to attain the highest levels of excellence and proficiency in our public information work, but we should never forget that we are engaged in a process that is essentially spiritual in character. Thus we should always call upon the power of Bahá'u'lláh to change the circumstances of any situation.

Below are some points to keep in mind when answering questions on particular issues specific to the opening of the Terraces.

Spending money on gardens in light of the great suffering in the world

- Bahá'ís believe that the problems in the world are systemic and cannot be solved in a piecemeal fashion. Creating conditions of equity and justice in the world is, in essence, a spiritual and moral challenge. The Gardens and Terraces on Mount Carmel represent something much more than physical structures and may be viewed as symbols of an entirely new way of life and a point of unity for millions of people around the world. Drawing inspiration from this spiritual center, to which they have contributed willingly, with great devotion and pride, Bahá'í communities around the world are learning how to build and provide models for patterns of community life that promote both material and spiritual well-being.
- The amount spent on the Mount Carmel projects – about US\$250 million over a period of 10 years – is relatively small in comparison with what is expended on many public and private activities or ephemeral events. Moreover, the buildings and gardens at the Bahá'í World Centre have been built to last hundreds of years.
- At the time the projects were launched, they represented the single largest private investment in Israel. Hundreds of local workers and contractors have been employed, as well as much local building material, representing a significant contribution to the local economy.
- No public funds were used, and no donations were accepted from outside the Bahá'í community.
- Bahá'í institutions and individuals are deeply concerned with ameliorating human suffering. Although relatively small in size, the Bahá'í community has sought to do its part in alleviating conditions of deprivation where its very modest funds have effect. Thus, at the grassroots level, Bahá'í community resources are frequently directed to humanitarian and development activities.

Questions about the Arab-Israeli conflict and our relationship with the State of Israel

- The Bahá'í Faith is entirely non-partisan and takes no position concerning the conflicts in this region. Its principal aim is the establishment of a just and peaceful future for all peoples.
- Many Bahá'ís around the world come from both Muslim and Jewish, as well as Christian and other, backgrounds.
- Bahá'u'lláh was brought to Ottoman Palestine as a prisoner in 1868, 80 years before the establishment of Israel. The small community of Bahá'í exiles established friendly relations with all groups. When Bahá'u'lláh's son 'Abdu'l-Bahá passed away in 1921, more than 10,000 people came to His funeral, and He was eulogized by the Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders.

- Under the British mandate, the Bahá'í holy places and other endowments were legally recognized.
- In 1948, cordial relations were established with the State of Israel, culminating with the signing of a Status Agreement in 1987, an agreement that recognizes the status of the Bahá'í World Centre as the center of a world religion.
- The relationship of the Bahá'í World Centre in Israel with the State of Israel is identical to the relationship of any Bahá'í community with the government of the country in which it resides – it is characterized by obedience to government and a strict abstention from partisan politics.
- There is no local Bahá'í community in Israel. The Founder of the Faith Himself instructed His followers not to propagate His Faith in the Holy Land, a practice that is continued to this day. This is not a restriction imposed from the outside, nor an agreement with the authorities, but is rather a matter of our own self-restraint out of respect for the character of the Jewish State.
- Much of the land for the Terraces was acquired before 1948 when the mountainside was bare. A few plots were purchased more recently.

Questions on the environmental impact of the Terraces

- Although the gardens in Haifa appear to be extremely large, it is only the quite limited formal portion in the center which is environmentally controlled. On both sides of the Terraces, the formal gardens are bordered by informal plantings that recreate the natural landscape of the area and feature native trees and wildflowers which harmonize with the Mount Carmel ecosystem. This aspect of the gardens' design greatly limits the amount of water needed. Overall, the gardens are designed for very slow, rather than rapid, growth.
- The gardens and fountains employ a number of advanced systems and methods that conserve water. Recycling, the use of drought-resistant plant species and sophisticated irrigation techniques are intrinsic to the design of the Gardens. Several outside specialists have described the usage of water in the Bahá'í Gardens as exemplary.
- The creation of a green belt within the heart of Haifa is already resulting in an array of beneficial environmental effects. These sanctuaries are now serving as wildlife corridors for many species of birds and animals.
- Integrated pest management methods which monitor need and which use an array of non-chemical controls, and, if necessary, “soft” pesticides are being applied in the gardens. Currently, pesticides are employed very sparingly. Herbicides are used only when essential, and, even then, only easily biodegradable chemicals are applied on specific areas through “spot-spraying”. In fact, most weeds are controlled through cultivation, mulching and plant competition.