

Háj Mihdí Arjmand

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Background

One century ago Háj Mihdí Á'Rafú'á became a legendary name among the residents of Hamadán, southwest of Tehran and one of the oldest Persian cities. The city was at the busy crossroad of trade and travel within the country and between Iran and Europe. It had a thriving economy, attracting new migrants from other parts of the country. The city was then the home of a multi-cultural, multi-religious community and was the scene of strong religious tensions. An ancient Jewish shrine, tombs of Esther and Mordechai, the graves of the leading Muslim philosopher and scientist Avicenna and the famous and popular Persian poet Bábá Táhir 'Uryán made the city the desired abode of Jews, Muslims and Christians alike. Western Christian missionaries had also been dispatched to the city to convert people of Jewish, Armenian and Muslim backgrounds to Protestant Christianity. As one of the earliest centres of Bahá'í teaching activities, Hamadán also had a sizeable and growing community of Bahá'ís of both Muslim and Jewish background. The Bahá'ís were facing resistance and opposition from the leaders of other religious communities—Jews, various sects of Muslims, and Christians, including those newly converted from Judaism to Christianity.

It was in such a setting that a young Talmudist, Mi'r Á'Rafú'á, who belonged to a highly respected Jewish household, accepted the Bahá'í Faith and became a most erudite

Bahá'í teacher and polemist. His erudition in the holy scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam impressed friends and foes, both the highly learned as well as the rank and file. Arjmand proved himself a successful defender and leading spokesman and protagonist of the new Faith. His humility, magnanimity and forbearance were exemplary and deeply appreciated by everyone.

Early Years

The given name of Háj Mihdí Arjmand was Mi'ír. His parents were Á'Rafú'á (shortened form of Áqá Rafá'íl) and Khátún, Á'Rafú'á's second wife and sister of Hakím Áqá Ján the first Bahá'í from among the Jewish community of Hamadán. Háj Mihdí Arjmand was born in Hamadán in 1861 (1240 AHS), one of the two sons of Khátún. He was known as Mihdí Á'Rafú'á (i.e. Mihdí son of Áqá Rafú'á). When identity cards began to be issued and everyone was required to choose a surname, he chose to be named Arjmand (valued). This choice was based on a Tablet written in his honour in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá, while encouraging him and praising his acceptance of the Faith, refers to him as the valued child (Persian *farzand-i arjmand*) and learned son of Abraham.

In his early years, Háj Mihdí attended the Talmud Torah *maktab* (Hebrew school)¹ in Hamadán and was literate only in Hebrew. His teacher was Mullá Ibráhím, son of Mullá Ya'qúb. Háj Mihdí was a very intelligent and eager student. Because he progressed quickly in his studies, his teacher became tired of having to attend to him continuously and give him new lessons.

Embracing the Bahá'í Faith

In 1878 (1295 AHL) a learned and prominent Bahá'í teacher, Mírzá 'Alí-Muhammad known as Ibn-i-Asdaq,² arrived in Hamadán. He had come from Khurásán and was

the house guest of Áqá Mírzá Báqir and Áqá Muhammad Javád.³ Ibn-i-Asdaq was constantly engaged in teaching the Bahá'í Faith and meeting with seekers of truth. Hakim Áqá Ján was one of those seekers who spent many days and nights discoursing with the famous Bahá'í travelling teacher and was finally convinced and became a Bal-al. He was the son of Il'ázár Káhin (Jewish chief priest), whose lineage went back to the prophet Aaron. Thus he was highly respected in the Jewish community in Hamadán. Owing to his spirituality, virtue and probity, Hakim Áqá Ján was a very popular and trusted physician in the city. He had been attracted to the piety of Áqá Muhammad Javád and, as a result, gradually became a Bahá'í. Hakim Áqá Ján, in turn, became an active and erudite teacher of his new faith and succeeded in converting a large number of the members of the Jewish community, both male and female, to the new religion.

Háj Mihdí, Hakim Áqá Jan's nephew, has recorded the following account of his conversion to the Bahá'í. Faith in the first chapter of his book *Gulshan-i-Haqáyi*q (Rose Garden of Truths).

I was encouraged by Hakim Áqá Ján to investigate the new Cause. I eagerly engaged in such investigation because my understanding of certain verses in the Book was that God guides the steps of the true seeker. I especially remembered such verses as Proverbs 8:17, 'I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me'; and Psalms 119:18, 'Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law'; and Jeremiah 6:16 where the Lord says: '... ask for the old paths, wherein [is] the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls'; and Matthew 7:7-9, 'Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?'; and in Qur'án 29:69, 'Whoso maketh efforts for Us, in Our Ways shall We

assuredly guide him. For verily God is with those who do right.' I also realized that blindly imitating our forefathers and their prejudices misleads the people and causes depravity. Thus I did my best to differentiate between truth and falsehood, using my reason as well as my knowledge and I supplicated God to guide me. I especially tried to gather together all that I could find in the holy scriptures of the signs and proofs for the validity of the claim of the true messengers of God. I found that all of those proofs and signs perfectly matched this Most Great Manifestation and I embraced His Faith.⁴

Arjmand was the recipient of a special Tablet from Bahá'u'lláh in which He expresses His delight in Háj Mihdí's recognition of the Manifestation of God and praises him for overcoming the prevailing prejudices and veils. He then bids him to rise to the service of His Cause. This Tablet ends with a special prayer revealed for Háj Mihdí to recite.

Háj Mihdí learned how to be a goldsmith from his father and engaged in that as his profession. He was a man of means and had a good name in the community. However, he became so engrossed in teaching the Bahá'í Faith that he later left his profession and devoted all his time and energy to teaching and propagating the religion and training Bahá'í teachers.

His erudition and character

After becoming a Bahá'í and attending Bahá'í gatherings, Háj Mihdí felt severely handicapped because of his illiteracy in Persian and Arabic. Consequently he started to study Persian and soon mastered it. He then realized that the Bahá'í scriptures are in both Persian and Arabic. Therefore he also studied Arabic and mastered that language too. As he knew Hebrew, mastering Arabic was not a difficult task for him. He soon became quite learned not only in Bahá'í literature but also Quranic and Islamic studies. He had

learned the scriptures by heart and during his debates he could easily recite proofs from the holy books of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Bahá'ís in Hamadán used to say that Háj Mihdí always carried three books in his pocket: the Torah, the Gospel and the Qur'án. If an enquirer asked him where in our Book such a verse is written, he would take out one of these books from his pocket and show the verses he was reciting. His mastery of the Bible was so great that once during a debate in Hamadán with Dr Holmes, an American missionary, the latter turned to Háj Mihdí in amazement and said, 'You are so knowledgeable and well-versed in the Holy Book, it is as if you had revealed it yourself!'

Músá Amánat has related that one night Háj Mihdí was engaged in a lengthy discussion about the Faith with a Jew from Kurdistan. The latter was highly prejudiced but quite knowledgeable in the Torah and its commentaries. He advanced that the Báb, as a 'nabí (prophet), should have overpowered His enemies and prevented His own execution by them. Háj Mihdí in reply mentioned the tribulations and sufferings of the biblical prophets. He especially mentioned the slaying of the prophet Zechariah in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. The Kurdistání Jew denied the occurrence of such an event. Háj Mihdí emphatically and repeatedly invited him to accept what he said. Finally he asked Amánat to fetch the Torah. Háj Mihdí took the book and, without hesitation and without looking at the table of contents, opened the book to the very page that he wanted to show. He then read the verse referring to the slaying of the prophet. The seeker was amazed and swore that he had read the Torah many times but had not noticed that point.

Músá Amánat, who met Háj Mihdí for the first time in 1925 in Hamadán, relates the following about Háj Mihdí's insight into the Bible:

Once Háj Mihdí, referring to a Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in his honour, told me, 'I had read and studied biblical texts many times but it was when I was honoured by a Tablet

from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá appreciating my humble services and praising my endeavours in teaching the Faith, adding that God willing I might discover the secrets of the words of the prophets, the prophecies mentioned in the Book, and might explain them for seekers, that I found a new insight into the scriptures, an insight which I did not have prior to that time.’ Háj Mihdí then recited the Tablet from memory.

In addition to the Jewish and Christian scriptures, Háj Mihdí had a profound knowledge of their laws, history and traditions to the extent that high-ranking Jewish and Christian scholars were unable to win debates with him on religious subjects. He was known to be an unequalled master at demonstrating the truth of Islam and the Bahá’í Faith to both Jews and Christians, even the very knowledgeable among them.

Those who were contemporary to Háj Mihdí have recorded their admiration of his character and his way of life. His dress, while modest, was always very clean. He was calm and dignified. He had magnanimity and a sense of sacrifice. Well-known and prominent Bahá’ís such as Ishráq-Khávarí,⁵ ‘Azízu’lláh Sulaymání, Músá Amánat, Háfizu’s-Sihhih, Fádil-i Mázarandarán and Fádil-i Shíráz have testified to the exemplary character of Háj Mihdí and to his profound knowledge of the scripture. Fádil-i Mázarandarán, himself a renowned teacher of the Bahá’í Faith, said Háj Mihdí was unparalleled when debating on the basis of biblical texts.

Sulaymání in *Masábih-i-Hidáyat* quotes the following account found in the daily memoirs of Háj Mihdí Akhaván-i-Safá, a prominent Bahá’í teacher:

A Bahá’í goldsmith by the name of Áqá Rafá’íl (surnamed Umídvarán) had developed a difference with Háj Mihdí and was defaming and casting aspersions upon him. The Spiritual Assembly decided to ask Áqá Rafá’íl to pledge not to continue such behaviour. Furthermore, it was decided that if he repeated his behaviour, he should pay a fine

of nine túmáns⁶ to the Spiritual Assembly's fund and be punished according to the wish of Háj Mihdí. The assembly also decided that some of its members should take Áqá Rafá'íl to Háj Mihdí's home and try to mediate and ameliorate the relations between them by asking Háj Mihdí to forgive and forget Áqá Rafá'íl's unseemly behaviour. That evening Áqá Mírzá Yúsif and I went to Háj Mihdí's home. Our conversation with Háj Mihdí, however, gave us the impression that he would never forgive Áqá Rafá'íl. At the suggestion of Háj Mihdí, we accompanied him the same evening to the home of Áqá Rafá'íl. Much to our surprise, in that meeting, Háj Mihdí apologized to Áqá Rafá'íl and demonstrated a deep and impressive humility and magnanimity. We were very happy indeed that our mission was accomplished in the best possible way. The next morning Áqá Rafá'íl came to me asking my advice on how he could ever compensate the magnanimity that Háj Mihdí had demonstrated. He said he was so ashamed of what he had done to Háj Mihdí that he did not know how to ask his forgiveness. This behaviour of Háj Mihdí was a great lesson to many friends and favourably influenced their conduct.⁷

Músá Amánat has quoted the following account from a letter written by Dr Habíb'u'lláh Thábití:

Rabqá, a female maternal cousin of Háj Mihdí and the wife of Áqá Sulaymán, the goldsmith, passed away in her youth while she had very small children. The Jews in Hamadán prevented her body from being buried in the Jewish cemetery. With the help of Muslims, they began to make life difficult for Áqá Sulaymán and finally managed to put him in gaol and cause the arrest of a number of Bahá'ís who had come for the funeral of Rabqá. The Bahá'ís had to pay 300 túmáns in order to be released. However Áqá Sulaymán was kept in gaol and was severely tortured and bastinadoed so that his feet were lacerated. Háj Mihdí rushed to the rescue of Áqá Sulaymán and said to the officials, 'Why are you torturing a young man who has lost his wife and whose small children are left unattended and

have no one to take care of them? Let him go and attend to his children.' His plea was not accepted until he volunteered to take the place of Áqá Sulaymán in gaol for four months. Unfortunately by the time Áqá Sulaymán was released and could attend to his children, his infant daughter had already passed away.

This is another example of Háj Mihdí's readiness to sacrifice for the sake of the Bahá'í Faith and to help others.

Pilgrimage and Travels

In 1908 (1326 AHL) 'Abdu'l-Bahá granted permission for a group of Bahá'ís from Hamadán to come on pilgrimage, among them Háj Mihdí. The group remained in the Holy Land for a period of about three weeks. When Háj Mihdí returned to Iran, he went to Rasht where he stayed, at the request of the Bahá'ís, to teach the Bahá'í Faith, especially to prominent persons in the city. Since Jews, like Muslims, used to call a person who had performed a pilgrimage (visiting Jerusalem according to the religious rites) a Hájí, meaning a person who has performed Háj (pilgrimage), it was at this time that Áqá Mihdí ibn-i-Áqá Rafú'á became known as Hájí Mihdí and was so called from then on.

In addition to his uninterrupted and untiring teaching activities in Hamadán, Háj Mihdí undertook a number of trips for the purpose of propagating the Bahá'í Faith. The first was in 1907 (1325 AHL) to Kirmánsháh, where he stayed for four months. Another trip was to Shiraz in 1936 (1315 AHS) at the request of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Tehran. The success of his teaching activities in Shiraz brought the opposition of Muslim clergy who appealed to the governor for the expulsion of Háj Mihdí. At first the governor was not willing to do the bidding of the mullás but finally he summoned Háj Mihdí and forced him to make a pledge to leave the town within three days.

Teaching the Bahá'í Faith

Háj Mihdí served as a member of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Hamadán for many years. In addition to conducting many classes for those enquiring about the Bahá'í Faith, he initiated special classes in Hamadán for training teachers of the Faith. Some other learned Bahá'ís in Hamadán followed his example and started similar classes. 'Abdul-Baba, in a Tablet addressed to Mírzá Mihdí Akháván-i-Safá and Mírzá Samímí-Qamsarí, praises the service rendered by Háj Mihdí and calls it the establishment of a magnificent structure and the preparation for the expansion of the 'straight way'.⁸

The acme of Háj Mihdí's teaching feats was his success in teaching the Bahá'í Faith to Sadru's-Sudúr, a very prominent religious leader and Islamic scholar in Hamadán who was known throughout the country. Sadru's-Sudúr later became a leading teacher of the Bahá'í Faith and the renowned founder of teacher training classes in Iran. He was repeatedly eulogized and highly praised by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.⁹

One day in 1897 (1276 AHS) Hakím Múshih Hay'ím, a Jew who was Sadr's family physician, was visiting him in his home. Sadr invited his physician to become a Muslim. Hakim told him, 'This new group, the Bahá'ís, claim that the Promised One (Qá'im) has come. I am busy investigating this matter. If you can refute this claim in a way that convinces me, I will become a Muslim.' Sadr accepted this challenge. The Bahá'ís arranged a meeting at FA Mihdí's home and asked him to lead the debate. Háj Mihdí presented proof for the validity of the claims of Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and Bahá'u'lláh by reciting the first few verses of chapter 33 of Deuteronomy.¹⁰ Sadr was very impressed and asked his host whether, since he was about to make a trip to Tehran, he would kindly introduce him to one of the Bahá'ís in Tehran so that he could follow the debate there. He was given the name and address of a Bahá'í in

Tehran. After contacting and meeting with the Hands of the Cause of God and other Bahá'í teachers, he became a Bahá'í. Háj Yuhanná Khán Háfizí has recorded the account of a meeting in Tehran in which some very prominent Bahá'ís such as Fádíl-i-Shírání¹¹ were present together with Háj Mihdí. Sadr gave an account of his investigations into the Bahá'í Faith. Then he turned to Háj Mihdí and said, 'You were the one who originally caused me to become a Bahá'í.

In 1888 (1267 AHS) Háj Mihdí began a successful project teaching the Bahá'í Faith in the village of Bahár, near Hamadán. The first Bahá'í of Bahár was Shaykh Ahmad Khán, who became a Bahá'í in that year. He had first learned about the Bahá'í Faith from Muhammad Shír-'Alí Zanjání and was taught the Faith by Háj Mihdí. Shaykh Ahmad Khán himself became an ardent teacher of the Bahá'í Faith and brought some others into the Faith.

The teaching of Ridá-Qulí Khán (entitled Sarvar-i-Shuhadá or Leader of Martyrs) was another example of Háj Mihdí's teaching feats. In 1897 (1276 AHS) Mírzá Ridá-Qulí Khán, who was from the village of Khánbághí, came to Hamadán to purchase certain items. One night he was the guest of Ustád Muhammad 'Alí Khayyátbáshí (master tailor); Mírzá Yúsif Saráju'l-Hukamá, the eldest son-in-law of Háfizu's-Sihhih, was also there. They did not talk about the Bahá'í Faith before bedtime. Mírzá Yúsif used to talk in his sleep in a very clear way. That night while he was asleep, he began to talk about the Bahá'í Faith as if debating with someone. This awakened other guests. They turned the light on and found him sound asleep. While continuing to sleep he started chanting in his melodious voice one of the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh addressed to a physician, followed by some of the poems of Bahá'u'lláh. Ridá-Qulí Khán awakened him and asked him what he was talking about. He found the words unique and marvellous. Mírzá Yúsif Khán did not give him a clear answer but later on informed the Bahá'ís. After two nights the Bahá'ís

invited Ridá-Qulí Khán to the home of Háfizu's-Sibbih and asked Háj Mihdí to be present as well.

Háj Mihdí and Ridá-Qulí Khán discussed the Bahá'í Faith for six hours. Ridá-Qulí Khán was convinced and related to those present the episode of Mirth Yúsif Khán's talking in his sleep. He asked for a book to study before going to bed. They gave him the Kitáb-i-Íqán. He could not go to sleep that night and concentrated on reading it. He became a steadfast Bahá'í and eventually a well-known martyr of the Faith.

Owing to his unique mastery of these holy scriptures, Arjmand was usually asked to represent the Bahá'í community in various public encounters. Músá Amánat has recorded an interesting encounter between Háj Mihdí and Protestant missionaries in Hamadán. He writes that one night during a very cold and bitter winter, some of the members of the Jewish community who had debated with the Bahá'ís and had not been able to refute the proofs they presented, invited them to Dr Allen's home. Dr Allen was the leader of the Christian Protestant missionaries who had been sent to Hamadán to convert Jews and, if possible, Muslims to Christianity. That night a number of American Christians, Jews, Armenians and Bahá'ís (including Músá Amánat) were present. Representing the Bahá'ís were Háj Mihdí and Ishráq-Khávárí. Ishráq-Khávárí spoke first, giving an excellent talk. Suddenly, one of the Armenians present in the room protested, saying, 'What are these verses and complicated matters you are presenting? We cannot understand their meanings and we do not believe in such verses.' Ishráq-Khávárí decided to stop speaking and remain silent.

Then Háj Mihdí proposed that if those gathered wanted to come to a conclusion, it would be better to appoint one spokesman and the Bahá'ís would do the same. The others should remain as an audience to witness the discussion. Everybody accepted this procedure. The Christians intro-

duced Dr Daniel Khán Irshádi. The Bahá'ís chose Háj Mihdí. From then on the debate centred on the content of the Bible. The Christian strongly argued that the words of the Gospels have no metaphorical meaning and that the prophecies should be fulfilled in a straightforward and literal manner. Háj Mihdí tried hard to convince them that the prophecies were allegorical and had inner meanings. Finally Háj Mihdí asked Dr Daniel Irshádi, 'Do you have faith in Jesus Christ?' Dr Daniel: 'Yes, may my life be a sacrifice to Him.' (It should be noted that Dr Daniel Irshádi was a true believer in Christ and he said this in all sincerity.) Háj Mihdí: 'As you have such an unshakable belief in Christ, please consider Matthew 17:20 which says, "verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you." Have you read this verse?' Dr Daniel: 'Yes, it is true.' And he started to recite this verse by heart. Háj Mihdí: 'I am very happy that you have such a strong faith. I dispense with the mountain. Please say to this sugar bowl which is here on the table in front of me to be moved to the table near yourself.' Obviously the sugar bowl did not move! There was a tumult in the room. Háj Mihdí: 'You see that the apparent meaning of the words are not intended. They indicate inner and deeper meanings. Thus we realize that the prophecies in the Bible have inner spiritual meanings that are different from their apparent material connotations.'

This discourse made the Bahá'ís extremely happy. They left the meeting in triumphant mood.

Tribulations and Sufferings

One day in 1891, when 'Izzu'd-Dawlih¹² was the governor of Hamadán, Háj Mihdí, accompanied by some of the

Bahá'ís, set out to climb to the summit of Mount Alvand as recreation. The Jewish clergy found it an opportunity to do some harm to the Bahá'ís. They petitioned the governor that the Bahá'ís were going to desecrate the summit of Alvand, which is a sacred and blessed spot for Muslims. The governor ordered the arrest of Háj Mihdí and his companions, had them punished and put in gaol for some days. Háj Mihdí had to pay a fine to be released.

On another occasion in 1898, when A'dudu'd-Dawlih¹³ was governor of Hamadán, the Jewish mullás slandered Háj Mihdí to an official who was the agent for minorities. They caused this agent to be so angered that he summoned Háj Mihdí to the government office and ordered that his head be shaved as punishment. For some time afterwards Háj Mihdí had to wear a long hat of lamb skin to protect his head from the cold weather of Hamadán and to conceal what had happened to him. Since the hat was too loose for his head, it covered his forehead and made him look rather funny. As a result the children in the street used to mock him.

In 1907 (1283 AHS) the governor of Hamadán was Sálaru's-Saltanih,¹⁴ son of Násiri'd-Dín Sháh. He had a close confidant, Sayyid Muhsin Mahallátí entitled Sadru'l-Ashráf, who was an ill-natured and very wicked man. Hájí Mírzá Mihdí Mujtahid, one of the leading mullás, colluded with this Sayyid to create problems for the Bahá'ís. Their plan was to accuse Bahá'ís of wanting to build a temple for themselves and then forcing the Bahá'ís to pay a considerable bribe to them to prevent the inevitable uproar. In order to achieve their end, they caused the arrest of four well-known Bahá'ís: Háj Mihdí Arjmand, Hájí Sulaymán the physician, Dá'í (Uncle) Rúbín and Hájí Músá Mubín. The governor dealt with the arrested Bahá'ís in a harsh manner and ordered that they remain gaol overnight and be expelled from the city the next morning.

The relatives of those arrested sought to find out what had happened to their dear ones. Náyib Ismá'íl, one of the

servants of Sadru'l-Ashráf, informed them that the way to obtain the release of the arrested men was to meet with Sadru'l-Ashráf. They arranged for the arrested Bahá'ís to meet with Sadru'l-Ashráf the same night. He told them that the only solution was to submit a sum of one thousand túmáns to the governor as a gift. Then it would be possible to arrange their release. He also added that the other condition was to pay him a gift of 200 túmáns as his commission. In short he asked for 1200 túmáns. The friends rejected this proposition on the ground that they had not committed any crime requiring such a fine, Sadru'l-Ashráf was angered by the attitude of the Bahá'ís and ordered the arrested men to be put into stocks and fetters and gaoled with murderers and highwaymen under appalling conditions.

The Bahá'ís finally had to pay a fine of 250 humans to the governor for the release of the prisoners. On their release the prisoners sought asylum in the telegraph office and sent a telegraph to Muzaffaru'd-Dín Sháh, petitioning against the action of the governor. They remained there for 19 days. Eventually came the decree of the Shah requiring that the injustices done to the four Bahá'ís be compensated properly. The government returned the money to the Bahá'ís and let them go free.

In 1908 (1287 AHS) the Bahá'ís in Hamadán established a Bahá'í school for children called Madrisih-yi Ta'yíd.¹⁵ For about two years the school was left in peace by the towns-people. Then in 1911 (1389 AHS), the Jewish community felt that it needed to build a new public bath in addition to the one it already had. It had an annual income of 2,000 túmáns from its bath and butcher's shop and paid 500 túmáns of this to the government, using the rest for its own school, the Alliance School.. The leaders of the Jewish community decided to invite the Bahá'ís to become partners in the new venture and to make a donation towards its cost. The Bahá'ís took this proposal to the Spiritual Assembly. The Assembly decided that Bahá'ís could only

participate in the project if the Jewish community allocated a certain amount of the income from the bath to the Ta'yíd School.

On the appointed date, the Bahá'ís (including Háj Mihdí) and some of the leaders of the Jewish community gathered together at the Alliance School. Háj Mihdí was the spokesman for the Bahá'ís. As the Jewish leaders wanted the Bahá'ís to give financial support to their project but receive no share of the income for their own school, the meeting could not agree on the proposed arrangement. This provoked the Jews to increase their opposition to the Bahá'ís.

During Muzaffaru'l-Mulk's¹⁶ governorship of Hamadán, the Jews told the management of the Alliance School that the Bahá'ís were belittling the school, the principal and its teachers. As the result, two French ladies who were teaching there petitioned the governor. The governor ordered that the sign of the Ta'yíd school be removed and a new sign erected saying that owing to disrespectful acts against the Alliance school, the Ta'yíd school was closed for ten days. He then expelled Háj Mihdí and two other Bahá'ís from Hamadán and sent them to Tehran. After six months of efforts in Tehran, they convinced the central government to dismiss the governor of Hamadán and allow them to return to their homes.

On another occasion, the Christians in Hamadán persuaded the manager of the telegraph office to commission a few people to go as telegraph office employees to the home of Háj Mihdí and beat him. Háj Mihdí was so injured that he had to remain in bed for ten days.

Activities in Tehran

In 1933 (1312 AHS) Háj Mihdí had to leave Hamadán owing to the increasing pressure on him from the clergy of all three main religions in the town, Muslims, Christians and Jews. He settled in Tehran for the rest of his life.

While Háj Mihdí was living in Tehran during these latter years of his life, he continued his teaching activities, conducting meetings to teach the Bahá'í Faith twice a week. These were organized in the Udlaján district of Tehran, where the majority of the Jewish community resided. Háj Mihdí, who was then an old man and very frail, would walk through the streets at night to the meeting place. The district was known for its very narrow lanes, full of turns and twists. It was very difficult to walk these lanes, particularly in winter when they were muddy and slippery and unlit at night. In spite of such difficulties, Háj Mihdí continued this practice for seven years, to the last days of his life.

Following the advice in a Tablet from 'Abdu'l-Bahá which encouraged him to do his utmost to bring the children of Israel into the fold of the Bahá'í community, Háj Mihdí managed to teach the Bahá'í Faith to a large number Jews in Hamadán, Shiraz, Kirmánsháhán, Kurdistan and Tehran, including most of his own relatives. Some of them became prominent Bahá'ís themselves, such as Áqá Mírzá Áqá Ján, a physician who was Háj Mihdí's nephew. Áqá Mírzá Áqá Ján became a very active and successful teacher of the Bahá'í Faith and received three Tablets from 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

In his notes Músá Amánat has described an incident that took place in Tehran at the home of Mr 'Azízu'lláh 'Azízí. Mr 'Azízí also recorded it in his memoirs.¹⁷ 'Azízu'lláh 'Azízí's home was located in the Jewish district in Tehran. Once a very important fireside meeting was held there at which a number of prominent and learned Bahá'í teachers were present, including Hand of the Cause Adíb-i-Iláhí, Mírzá Khalíl Arjumand, Háj Áqá Muhammad 'Aláqband-Yazdí (surnamed Fá'iz),¹⁸ Áqá Sayyid Hasan Háshimízádih (surnamed Mottavajih),¹⁹ Hand of the Cause Háj Mullá 'Alí Akbar Shahmírzádí, Hand of the Cause Ibn-i-Asdaq, Jináb-i Rahím Mullá Bákháj, Hand of the Cause Ibn-i-Abhar and Háj Mihdí Arjmand. On the Jewish side were present such prominent persons as Mullá Rahím Múrih,

Mullá Ibráhím Rínú, Mullá Ya‘qúb Babá’í and his brother Ilí Sáfán, Mullá Il‘ázár Rahím and Mullá Dániyál (father of ‘Azíz’u’lláh ‘Azízí). The meeting was arranged to discourse with the rabbis and Jewish scholars.

After some lengthy exchanges without any conclusion, Háj Mihdí proposed to continue the discussion under three conditions: first, that each side appoint a representative and the debate be left to those two; second, that whatever was said by each party be written down so there would be no doubt about it, while the transcript could be used in the future by other interested parties; and third, that after the end of the discourse, all the pages of the written records be signed and endorsed by the two representatives. This proposal was accepted by both sides. Mullá Rahím Bákháj was appointed as the recording secretary.

Háj Mihdí then began to pose questions. For each answer given by the Jewish party he asked that the answer be written down and signed. Finally the Jewish party gave in and said, ‘Leave us alone. We will not bother you. Please do not bother us. We cannot leave our ancestral belief at this advanced age.’ The meeting continued until the next morning and resulted in ‘Azíz’u’lláh ‘Azízí becoming a Bahá’í and opening his house for Bahá’í meetings.

Háj Mihdí Arjmand’s Family

Háj Mihdí married Távús Khánúm in Hamadán. In 1933 (1312 AHS) he settled in Tehran, where he passed away on 25 November 1941 (4 Azar 1320 AHS) at the advanced age of 80. He was survived by three children: two daughters, Díná surnamed Badí’ih Navídí, and Amih surnamed Lamí’ih Saná’í (Ridvání), and one son, Habíbu’lláh Arjmand. Habíbu’lláh’s children—Húshang Arjmand, Parí Mahbúbiyán, Mahín Bannáyán, Mahbúbih Arjmand, Rawyá Mítháqí and Suhráb Arjmand—founded the Háj Mehdi Arjmand Memorial Fund for Bahá’í scriptural studies in 1992.

Works of Háj Mihdí Arjmand

Háj Mihdí, although an ardent and highly talented scholar in religious studies and a prominent polemist and debater with exceptional skills, was neither keen nor at ease in writing. His well-known book *The Rose Garden of Truth* (*Gulshan-i-Haqáyiḡ*), which won a very special commendation from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, is an apologia for the Bahá’í Faith based on his answers and arguments to the questions raised in a series of debates with Dr Holmes, a missionary physician sent to Hamadán to provide medical services and teach Christianity. Háj Mihdí writes in the introduction to the book that since his answers received very wide publicity among the populace and were widely circulated, he decided to put them in writing to protect them from distortion, errors and falsifications.

According to an account written by Hájí Yuhanná Khán Háfizu’s-Sihhih, surnamed Háfizí in 1897 (1315 AHL), Hájí Hakím Dáwud, brother of Hájí Hakím Hárún, who had just returned from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, was invited by Dr Holmes to become a Christian. In response, Hájí Dáwud told him, ‘You are facing two pretenders or claimants, namely Islam and the Bahá’í Faith.’ Dr Holmes replied, ‘I have conversed with the Bahá’ís in Tabriz and have noticed that their claims do not agree with the content of the Bible; however I am ready to discuss the matter once again with them.’ Hájí Dáwud consulted some other Bahá’ís and they decided to arrange such a meeting with both Háj Mihdí and Hájí Sulaymán Ilyáhu (Nahávandí) in attendance. This meeting took place at Háj Mihdí’s home on a Saturday. Two students from the American school in Hamadán, Áqá Mírzá Músá and Áqá Mírzá Dániyál, acted as interpreters. The debate between the two sides took the form of quoting chapter and verses from the Bible. Dr Holmes became very interested in the depth of Háj Mihdí’s knowledge of the Bible and invited those present to gather at his home the following Saturday in order to continue the

debate. These weekly meetings on Saturdays, alternating between the homes of Háj Mihdí and Dr Holmes, continued for about a year and a half. Finally Dr Holmes, who found himself unable to present convincing answers to the points raised by Háj Mihdí, asked to be excused from continuing the debate. However Dr Holmes developed an understanding of and a favourable attitude towards the Bahá'í Faith. Later, Háj Mihdí, assisted by two other prominent Bahá'í teachers, Mírzá Mahmúd Zarfání²⁰ and Shaykh Muhsin Dabír-Mu'ayyid Na'ímí,²¹ transformed Háj Mihdí's presentations in those debates into the book *Gulshan-i-Haqáyi*q.

At the end of the book Háj Mihdí noted that he finished writing it in Hamadán in 1916 (1335 AHL), which is 20 years after the debates with Dr Holmes. Ishráq-Khávarí's history of the Bahá'í Faith in Hamadán records that Mírzá Mahmúd Zarfání had been in Hamadán and had assisted Háj Mihdí in the preparation of this book. During the years of the Second World War, Háj Mihdí, who was then living in Tehran, benefited from the assistance of Ali Nakhjavani in the preparation of the manuscript for its first publication in Tehran in 1945. The *Gulshan-i-Haqáyi*q was printed for the second time in 1982 in the United States by Kalimát Press.

In addition to the introduction and an epilogue, the book has 34 chapters divided into four parts and is 302 pages long. The introduction is devoted to the background of the book. The epilogue is on the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. This chapter is in answer to Dr Holmes's question on the claim of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and includes an explanation of the covenant in the Bahá'í Faith and the prophecies of the scriptures related to the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

The first part of the book has five chapters. Chapter one is the account of the conversion of the author to the Bahá'í Faith. The other chapters are on the people's blind imitation of their clergy, the religious leaders' ignorance of the

true meaning of their own scripture, the necessity of the change of the previous religions' secondary laws, ordinances and teachings by the new religion, and the seeming contradictions among the scriptures. The second part of the book presents proofs of the truth of Manifestations of God and their divine influence. The nine chapters of this part are devoted to explaining the nature, station and proofs of the Manifestations of God and to refuting false prophets. The third part of the book is on the station and claim of Bahá'u'lláh as well as relevant proofs and prophecies. The nine chapters of the fourth part are related to scriptural prophecies on the day of God and fulfilment of prophecies of the Torah regarding the coming of Christ and Muhammad.

The work is actually a source book of prophecies and other relevant verses of the Bible and Qur'án on the proof of the divine messengers, their stations and their contribution to progressive revelation, it is full of quotations of verses from these scriptures. It should be added that, according to 'Azízu'lláh Sulaymání,²² Háj Mihdí's personal interpretation of some verses of the Bible found in his book differs from the interpretation of the same verses provided in the Bahá'í scripture.

When news of the composition of this book reached 'Abdu'l-Bahá, He addressed a Tablet to Háj Mihdí saying, "Though this magnificent book has not yet reached here, but since that excellent book is the rose garden of truths and meanings and includes the prophecies of the divine messengers, its heavenly fragrance has already been smelled. This treatise is a confirmation and this book is an accomplishment materialized by the Glorious Lord."²³ The book's title comes from this Tablet.

Háj Mihdí, following the same general theme found in The Rose Garden of Truths, wrote a few other treatises that are as yet unpublished. The following are the ones known to exist in manuscript form:²⁴

1. Sharh-i-Bi'that-i-Nabí: The public declaration of a prophet, and prophecies in the scriptures and their fulfilment in the manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh.
2. Refutation of the claim of some of the Jewish scholars who considered Joshua son of Nun as the Promised One of the Torah with the same station of prophethood as Moses.
3. An apologia interpreting the resurrection of the dead.
4. An apologia on the return of the Israelites from the sea of Egypt during the second emancipation.

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Notes

1. The old-style one-room schools in Iran were called *maktab*. At these, all the students would sit on the floor in the one room. The students were accepted throughout the year and each one would start his individualized studies on his arrival. Each student at the completion of an assignment would ask the teacher to monitor his performance, and if acceptable, was given a new lesson to prepare. Thus each student moved forward according to his personal aptitude and motivation.
2. Mírzá ‘Alí-Muhammad, known as Ibn-i-Asdaq, one of the four Hands of the Cause of God appointed by Bahá’u’lláh. See Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá’ís*, pp. 171–6.
3. Áqá Muhammad Báqir and Áqá Muhammad Javád were two brothers from Naráq and belonged to a well-to-do merchant family. Their home in Naráq was next to the residence of Hájí Kamálu’d-Dín Naráqí. Áqá Muhammad Javád had noticed certain comings and goings at his neighbour’s house that Hájí Kamálu’d-Dín tried to conceal. He began to investigate this situation. Thus he started to talk with Hájí Kamálu’d-Dín and finally became a Bahá’í. Then, without informing his father, he went to Hamadán where he learned that Bahá’u’lláh was in Baghdad. He was eager to proceed to Baghdad and receive the honour of visiting Bahá’u’lláh. He asked for money from his father and travelled to Baghdad, staying there for three years. Then he returned to Hamadán and settled. He taught the Faith to his brother, Áqá Muhammad Javád. The two brothers had a trading company in Hamadán and were active in teaching the Bahá’í Faith and serving the Bahá’í community.
4. Arjmand, *Gulshan-i-Haqáyi*q, pp. 4–6.

5. A prominent Bahá'í scholar, teacher and writer who wrote many books on the Bahá'í Faith, some of which were published. For his autobiography see *Yádígár*, a compilation of the texts of the talks given by 'Abdu'l-Hamid Ishráq Khávarí, edited by Mansúr Ruháníyán, 1st ed., no publisher or place of publication, 1989; 2nd ed. Persian Institute of Bahá'í Studies, Dundas, Ontario, Canada, 1994. See pp. 7–19.
6. A túmán is a unit of the money in Iran. At that time it was equal to several dollars.
7. Sulaymání, *Masábih-i-Hidáyat*, vol. 4, p. 447.
8. In one of the many Tablets in honour of Sadru's-Sudúr, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: 'Indeed the most essential thing in this day is to instruct the friends in teaching the Cause.'
9. Sadru's-Sudúr's given name was Sayyid Ahmad. He was the son of an influential mullá known as Sadru'l-'Ulamá (the leader of the clergy) and had acquired Islamic knowledge, studying under leading Shí'í religious scholars and leaders in Isfahan, Najaf and Karbala. One of his students, Nasru'lláh Rastigár, who himself became a famous Bahá'í teacher, is the author of the biography of Sadr and has related in his book some events in the life of Háj Mihdí which are summarized in the following paragraphs.
10. 'And this [is] the blessing wherewith Moses the man of God blessed the children of Israel before his death. And he said, The Lord came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; he shined forth from mount Párán, and he came with ten thousands of saints, from his right hand [went] a fiery law for them.'
11. Fádil-i-Shírází was a prominent Bahá'í mystic, scholar and teacher. He is famous for his readiness to challenge the opponents with Mubáhilih (mutual imprecation). (See Sulaymání, *Masábih-i-Hidáyat*, vol. I for a biography.)
12. 'Abdu's-Samad Mirzá entitled 'Izzu'd-Dawlih was the third son of Muhammad Sháh Qájár and younger brother of Násiru'd-Dín Sháh. He was an educated person, fluent in French and English. He lived a long life and was appointed to many important positions during the reign of three successive kings. He was three times appointed governor of Hamadán. This incident occurred during the third period of his governorship in Hamadán in 1888–92.

For a biography and photograph refer to Mihdí Bámdád, *Sharh-i Hál-i Rijál-i Írán*, vol. 2, pp. 268–70.

13. Sultán-Ahmad Mírzá entitled A'dudu'd-Dawlih, 48th son of Fath-'Alí Sháh, was appointed Governor of Hamadán in place of his brother, Jahásúz Mírzá, in 1894. See Bámdád, *Sharh-i Hál-i Rijál-i Írán*, vol. 5, p. 55.
14. Nusratu'd-Dín Mírzá, fourth son of Násiru'd-Dín Sháh, entitled Sáláru's-Saltanih, was appointed governor of Hamadán at the age of 22. See Bámdád, *Sharh-i Hál-i Rijál-i Írán*, vol. 5, pp. 315–17 for his biography and photographs.
15. Ta'yíd means 'confirmation'.
16. Háj Mírzá Muhsin Khán entitled Muzaffaru'l-Mulk. His sister was one of the wives of Zillu's-Sultán, son of Násiru'd-Dín Sháh, thus he was appointed by his brother-in-law as Deputy Governor in some of the provinces under the general governorship of Zillu's-Sultán. See Bámdád, *Sharh-i Hál-i Rijál-i Írán*, vol. 3, pp. 212–14.
17. 'Azízí, *Táj-i Vahháj*, pp. 139–51.
18. Háj Muhammad 'Aláqband-i Yazdí surnamed Fá'iz, a well-known Bahá'í teacher and author of two manuscripts, *Madfanu'sh-Shuhadá* (the burial places of the Martyrs) and *Madfanu'l-Ahibbá* (the burial places of the Friends—i.e. the Bahá'ís).
19. Sayyid Hasan Háshimízádih, one of the students of Sadru's-Sudúr, was a well-known Islamic scholar and Bahá'í travelling teacher. As a Bahá'í youth, he initiated an activity for character development in Bahá'í children that later developed into a system used throughout Iran for the Bahá'í education for children. This initiative received the high commendation and encouragement of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.
20. Mírzá Mahmud Zarqání, a prominent Bahá'í teacher and writer, was one of the members of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's retinue during His tour of the West, acting as His secretary and diarist. He also acted as secretary to Shoghi Effendi during the early years of the Guardianship.
21. Muhsin Dabír-i-Mu'ayyad was a Bahá'í teacher and scholar in Islamic studies and the son-in-law of Mírzá Na'ím, a famous Bahá'í poet and teacher during the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

22. ‘Azíz’u’lláh Sulaymání was a Bahá’í scholar, teacher and author. His masterpiece is *Masábíh-i-Hidáyat* (Lamps of Guidance), a nine-volume biographical account of 95 prominent teachers of the Bahá’í Faith in Iran. It was published by the Bahá’í Publishing Trust in Iran.
23. This is an approximate English rendering of the original text.
24. From the text of Músá Amánat’s talk at the first Majma’-i-Irfán (Irfán Colloquium) at Green Acre Bahá’í School, November 1994.