



Descending Mount Carmel from The Shrine of the Báb in Haifa, Israel, are 19 manicured and illuminated garden terraces, which Bahá'ís consider a gift to humanity. At the foot of the hill, various lamps are lit in celebration of the several major religions commemorating holy days in their holy land.

Faith in Diversity

Sevara Sobhani '20 cherishes how the Bahá'í Faith is devoted to inclusivity and independent thinking.

By Meilee D. Bridges
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As she descended the garden Terraces of the Bahá'í Faith into busy Ben Gurion Street in Haifa, Israel, Sevara Sobhani '20 gazed out across a splendid sea of lights: sparkling crescents and stars, which are often associated with Islam; beautiful hanukkiahs, the nine-candle menorahs (or lamps) lit in celebration of Hannukah; and an enormous Christmas tree crowned by a Christian cross—all at the footsteps of the Shrine of the Báb, the second most sacred site for those practicing the Bahá'í Faith. During a season of festivals in the shared holy land of so many major religions, Sobhani experienced immense joy as she observed individuals carousing while “being kind, loving, and respectful to each other,” she says. “You don’t hear about that in the news; usually, Israel is associated with a site of tension. But seeing so many people with diversity of thought, diversity of belief, and diversity of religious practice come together with love for each other . . . was really an incredibly moving experience for me.”

A progressive faith

Sobhani traveled to Israel to pray in the shrines commemorating Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, and the Báb, another of the faith's central figures. A relatively young religion that is also one of the fastest growing and one of the most progressive, the Bahá'í Faith was established in 1844 in what was then Persia (now Iran). Today, it is practiced by 5 to 7 million people in almost every country in the world. Its central tenets are unity, equality, and harmony: Bahá'ís believe that all humanity is one; that all religions stem from one god—and if religion is the cause of disunity, then it would be better for the religion to not exist at all; that individuals and communities should be free from prejudice; that the sexes are equal; that religion and science should be intertwined rather than mutually exclusive; and that education is important and therefore should be universal.

For Sobhani, the faith is perfectly represented by the words of Bahá'u'lláh: "Let your vision be world embracing rather than confined to yourself."

Born and raised in Uzbekistan, the soft-spoken but impressively articulate Sobhani was not born into the Bahá'í Faith; her parents, who still live in the Central Asian country, are progressive Muslims, and approximately 90% of those who identify as religious in the country are affiliated with Islam. However, when Sobhani first arrived in the U.S. in 2006 as an exchange student at Granger High School, just 20 miles east of SU, she lived with a host family who taught her about their beliefs. She was intrigued, but as an exchange student, Sobhani had signed a contract affirming that she would not make any life-altering decisions during her time in the States; the experience was to be purely educational. So although she felt a strong affinity for the core teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, conversion was not yet an option.



Sevara Sobhani '20 visited the Shrine of the Báb, a UNESCO World Heritage Site located in Haifa, Israel, during a spiritual pilgrimage in December 2019.

When she returned to Uzbekistan after nine months in Texas, her family acknowledged that she was somehow different. She responded assuredly, "Thank you." She eagerly shared what she had discovered about Bahá'í beliefs with her "super awesome parents," as she describes them. Although they had never heard of the religion, they encouraged her to explore. This came as no surprise considering her mother and father had always been strong proponents of education; they had even made substantial financial sacrifices over the years to ensure that Sobhani and her younger siblings were engaging in the best learning they could afford. So when she expressed her desire to learn more about the Bahá'í Faith, they drove her five hours away to the nearest community center just so she could delve more deeply into its teachings.

That fall, Sobhani returned to Texas and began taking general-education courses at Austin Community College (ACC). One world religions class included a field trip to the Bahá'í center in Austin. "I felt like it answered quite a lot of the questions I had growing up," she recalls. She loved that even as early as 1844, Bahá'í leaders and community members were openly discussing how racism was the U.S.'s most significant problem and were calling for both racial healing and the erasure of prejudice. "No religion was talking about that at the time," she says, "or talking about how humanity has two wings: one is man, and the other is woman—and until both wings are developed, the bird can't take flight. Or the concept of doing away with extreme wealth and poverty, promoting generous voluntary giving, and imposing the equalization of wealth. It's such a progressive faith. It was really wonderful."

Perhaps the most important tenet that drew Sobhani to the Bahá'í Faith was its call for the independent investigation of truth. "You don't inherit the faith or views of your parents; you need to investigate them on your own so you can truly commit for your own self. And I feel like that's really important," she says.

But her spiritual transition came at a price: because she had converted from Islam, Sobhani could no longer return to her family home in Uzbekistan safely. So she decided to take a break after ACC to focus on earning her U.S. citizenship, seeking religious asylum in doing so. She worked, fell in love with and wed a Georgetown local (Sobhani is her married name), and became a devoted mother of two.

After several years, Sobhani was able to entertain the notion of returning to college. Her U.S. citizenship enabled her to qualify for scholarships, grants, and loans, which broadened the possibilities of where she could complete her undergraduate degree. She wanted a university that was geographically close to her children's school, but she also sought an education that aligned with her the Bahá'í Faith—"a school that was really progressive, at least from the outside, and one that valued not only the diversity of bodies but also diversity of thought and experience." She chose Southwestern, she says, "because I feel like the faculty is not only incredibly woke, but they also know how to create a really inclusive environment."

Nontraditional and intentional

Although the classifications *traditional* and *nontraditional* student are rapidly changing thanks to the evolving demographics of students attending college today, Sobhani identifies as the latter because she was international, is several years older than the majority of her fellow SU seniors, is married with children, transferred from another college, did not attend Southwestern directly after graduating from high school, and holds down a full-time job while taking on a full course load.

"Working and going to school full-time and trying to maintain an all-A 4.0 GPA while still being a very intentional, proactive parent and active community member as a Bahá'í—it takes a lot of finagling and very little sleep!" she admits with a laugh. "Luckily, I'm surrounded by so many dedicated souls who



Sobhani with fellow Bahá'í pilgrims—just some of the 200 people from approximately 40 countries who came to pray in the Shrines of Bahá'u'lláh and The Báb in Haifa. The photo was taken on the steps of the Seat of the Universal House of Justice, an elected governing body of Bahá'ís.

want to see me succeed, like my in-laws, my friends, my amazing friends and mentors. But it takes an entire village for one nontraditional female of color who's a first-generation immigrant and first-generation college-bound student to stay in school and make it work."


Case in point: on the day that her flight left for Israel last December, Sobhani still had to work a full shift as a senior stylist at Stitch Fix, complete two finals, and turn in a final paper. But she was able to travel to Haifa alone because her husband stayed behind to care for their children back in Georgetown.

"I needed to be by myself. I didn't want to worry about anybody's snack or nap," she laughs softly. "But I really want to lead a life that is intentional, that honors my values and my purpose in life. I guess that's why I felt like I needed to get away and pray and turn inwards—away from grades and job schedules and paychecks—and ask what would I really want to do if I wasn't motivated by money, status, and 401(k)s."

That same intentionality had guided Sobhani when she selected her courses of study at Southwestern. At ACC, she had been fascinated by linguistics, business administration, and hospital administration. But in the years that followed, she says, "As I was staying home, raising children, and seeing everything moving into a super tech-savvy digital era, I felt like there will come a time when we will need people who have very human skills." So during the past four semesters at SU, she has pursued a major in communication studies. "A lot of people get into communications thinking, 'Oh, it's going to teach me to be a good talker or a better communicator.' But it really helps you understand why these highly popular cultural texts that are circulating all over are so powerful. It teaches you to be such a critical thinker—and I feel that if I learn to look critically at everything, I can learn to do anything," Sobhani remarks.

The SU senior hopes that her major will help her find solutions to the systemic oppression she sees today. "I don't want to go into advertising and marketing because I don't want to take this critical knowledge and apply it to manipulate audiences. I want to understand why these messages are so popular and so effective." And although communication studies allows her to analyze and evaluate the rhetoric of political candidates and their representations in the media, as a Bahá'í, Sobhani avoids partisanship because she does not believe that politicians can effect real change. "My job as an active community member is working shoulder to shoulder with my neighbors on creating and transforming our community; nobody will come in and do that for me. Waiting for a politician to come in and change that is foolish," she argues.

Sobhani is often lumped into the Millennial generation because of her age, which she finds interesting because, after all, she did not grow up in the U.S. and was not raised with those cultural values and ideals. However, her personal beliefs and the Bahá'í Faith have shaped her commitment to social justice and equality, which does align with many Millennials' aspirations. "It seems like



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my generation is willing to roll up their sleeves and do the work and maybe reject our old ideals of wealth equaling our worth," she opines. "We are willing to pay more for food as long as our dollars are going to an actual person, to an actual business. We are willing to go out and vote against our own interests if that means fairness to those in our community."

That desire to advocate for equality influenced Sobhani's choice of minor as well: race and ethnicity studies. She attributes her ability to articulate social critique to those classes. "Before coming to Southwestern, I knew how racism was probably America's biggest issue," she says, "and [how] it's our responsibility as people of color and white people to all come together to put our heads together and change people's hearts, minds, and actions. But I didn't really have the terms for it."

Now that she's approaching graduation, however, Sobhani looks forward to applying what she's learned and making a meaningful difference in her career. "I don't want to be a cog in the capitalist machine," she declares. "As this is my last year at Southwestern, I really wanted to take time to turn in spiritually and meditate and figure out what I want to do and how I want to make an impact after I leave Southwestern and how I want to utilize all this rich knowledge."

To think independently and to speak courageously

And so the Southwestern senior spent nine days on her spiritual pilgrimage with several other Bahá'ís. "You go and have plenty of time to meditate in these idyllic gardens in the middle of the desert in Israel," she describes. But because Sobhani and her fellow pilgrims arrived in Haifa before Christmas and stayed during the first days of Hannukah, they also had the remarkable opportunity to observe the peaceful yet boisterous

intermingling of multiple racial and ethnic groups: Israeli Jews, Russian Jews, Israeli Christians, Arab Muslims, Bahá'ís, and Druze (a close-knit religious and ethnic group that blends elements of Islam, Hinduism, and classical Greek philosophy). The festivities represented the exuberant unity of religion that Bahá'ís hold dear.

Thinking back on her sojourn to Israel, Sobhani says, "I needed that trip because I really didn't want to get out of college, get a super-big-girl job, and get to a point in my life and say, 'OK, fine, I have this fancy house and this fancy car' but think, *Now what? Is there more to life?*"

As she traversed the terraced gardens of the Bahá'í shrine, she considered another saying of Bahá'u'lláh: "Our responsibility is to bring ourselves to account each day and night." By practicing daily reflection on her thoughts and actions since returning from her pilgrimage, Sobhani has been able to stop moving as if on autopilot and examine what's to come. "I still don't know what I'm going to do," she admits, "but I want to really align my purpose and my skill with the change that I want to see. I just know that I want intention and I want to really be of help in whatever way that my help is needed and whatever way that I can be included to help."

Even if she hasn't figured "it" all out just yet, Sobhani is confident that "it" is not out of reach. That confidence, bolstered by her faith and her trip to Haifa, is something she also attributes to her college education. "Southwestern teaches us to be critical thinkers and critical scholars," she says. "They tell us to resist mainstream narratives, and that's what we're doing." She says that she's proud to attend a university that creates a safe environment for critical debate and graduates independent thinkers instead of "the mindless machines that got us into all of these crises, [like] the housing market [or] environmental apathy. It's these independent, critical thinkers who are bold and courageous enough to say, 'I reject these ideologies that get us into these messes.' And for that, I'm really grateful for Southwestern."



Sobhani photographed this sign exemplifying the Bahá'í Faith's message of inclusivity and unity.