

Ashura: The timeless message of Imam Hussein (AS)

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“This movement of mine is not on account of stubbornness, rebellion, worldly passions or instigation by Satan. It is also not my object to create trouble or to oppress anyone. The only thing which invites me to this great movement is that I should reform the affairs of the followers of my grandfather, eradicate corruption, undertake enjoining to do good and restraining from evil.” – Imam Hussein (AS).¹

Ashura, the tenth day of the month of Muharram, the first month on the Islamic calendar, marks the annual commemoration of the revolution begun on the plains of Karbala, Iraq over 1300 years ago by Imam Hussein ibn Ali (AS), the grandson of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad (S). In the year 680, Imam Hussein (AS) and his 72 companions² were martyred in a heroic confrontation that not only became the defining moment for Shi’a Islam, but also the exemplar of valiant struggles against overwhelming forces of oppression and injustice for all time. Imam Hussein’s timeless message was straightforward and sincere: “I wish that, through the strength of my suffering tyranny, I may root out the very foundation of oppression and cruelty.”³

Imam Hussein (AS) was also the canonical example for leadership, something terribly lacking in our times. With exceptions that one can count on one hand, there are no leaders today, only mere managers who, in the words of scholars Ian Mitroff and Warren Bennis, “have no gut stake in enterprise and no vision.”⁴ Hussein was a true leader: As the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (S) and the son of Imam Ali (AS) his “gut stake” was at the very heart of Islam, and his vision not only involved restoring and safeguarding the Islam of his grandfather, but also establishing a universal example for confronting tyrannical powers for all time by means of his selfless sacrifice. So powerful a leader was Hussein that he has been given the title of Sayyid al-Shuhada,⁵ the Leader of the Martyrs, and his gallant stand at Karbala has served as a beacon of inspiration and hope for oppressed peoples everywhere.

To appreciate the significance of the message of Imam Hussein (AS), we must briefly review the historical events in Islam that led to his tragic death. Despite a public declaration on March 16, 632 at Ghadir Khumm⁶ by the Prophet Muhammad (S) that Ali ibn Abi Talib (AS), his cousin and husband of his daughter Fatima (SA), was to be the next leader, or khalifah (caliph), of the Islamic Ummah, the leaders of the powerful Ummayyad clan, the Banu Ummayah, conspired at Saqifah⁷ to appoint Abu Baker after the death of the Prophet (S) on June 8, 632.⁸ Two years later, Abu Bakr named Umar ibn al-Khattab as the next khalifah, and following him, Uthman ibn Affan was chosen in 644 by six companions of the Prophet (S) to finally return control of the Islamic Ummah to the wealthy Banu Ummayah.⁹

By 656, discontent over the injustices, oppression and nepotism of the Ummayyad rulers had become so great that some rightfully outraged Muslims killed Uthman. Acquiescing to widespread public demands, Ali accepted his rightful position of khalifah, causing the members and supporters of the disgruntled Banu Ummayah aristocracy to leave Medina and regroup in Syria, where they plotted to regain control of the Islamic Ummah. In Damascus, the most powerful of the Banu Ummayah, Muawiyah ibn Abi Sufyan, consolidated his power base and,

defiantly denying the legitimacy of the Caliphate of Ali (AS), incited the Prophet's former companions Talha and al-Zubayr to stage a rebellion, which Ali (AS) was forced to suppress.¹⁰

Despite the defeat of his rebels at the Battle of the Camel, Muawiyah continued his mutiny by not only refusing to swear allegiance to Imam Ali (AS), but also by accusing him of conspiring with the assassins of Uthman ibn Affan and demanding blood revenge. After an exchange of letters in each of which Ali (AS) tried to convince him to give up his rebellion, Muawiyah demanded that the Imam dissolve his legitimate government and subject himself to arbitration to determine the fate of the Islamic Ummah.¹¹

Knowing full well that Ali (AS) would refuse his demands, Muawiyah moved his mutinous army to Siffin, west of present day al-Riqqa in Iraq, and occupied the banks of the Euphrates, cutting off the Imam's forces from access to water, leaving him no choice but to fight. But once Ali (AS) had regained control of the river banks, he ordered his soldiers to allow Muawiyah's troops access to the water.¹² A fierce battle ensued in which thousands of rebels were killed, and just when victory for Ali's side appeared imminent, Muawiyah resorted to chicanery by halting the hostilities and having his men place copies of the Holy Quran on the tips of their spears, thus forcing the Imam to stop fighting and accept arbitration.¹³ As a result of the decision of the arbitrators, Muawiyah was recognized as the khalifah almost everywhere except Iraq.¹⁴

As Muawiyah used bribery and terror tactics to expand his domination over Iraq, Imam Ali (AS) was forced to withdraw to his last stronghold in al-Kufah. It was there that the Imam met his fate on January 25, 661 (19th of Ramadan 40AH)¹⁵ at the hands of Abd al-Rahman ibn Muljim, who struck his head with a poisoned sword while he was in prostration offering the dawn prayer.¹⁶ Ali (AS) died two days later on the 21st of Ramadan after which his son Hasan (AS), the older brother of Imam Hussein (AS), assumed the Imamate. Immediately, Muawiyah declared war on Imam Hasan, who, to avoid further bloodshed and maintain the fragile unity of the Islamic Ummah, entered into a peace treaty with the Damascene despot. Under the terms of the treaty, Imam Hasan temporarily transferred his political authority to Muawiyah, to be returned to him upon the latter's death, and then passed on by him to his younger brother, Imam Hussein.¹⁷

Following Imam Hasan's death by poisoning at the hands of Muawiyah in 671, Imam Hussein (AS) assumed the leadership role. When in 680 before his death, Muawiyah chose his son Yazid as khalifah instead of returning the leadership to Imam Hussein (AS) as per the terms of the treaty made with his older brother, open revolt broke out among the Iraqis in al-Basra and al-Kufah against the Syrian tyrant. The people of al-Kufah had written numerous letters to Imam Hussein, who had already left Medina for Mecca to avoid swearing loyalty to Yazid, inviting him to come there to be their spiritual leader,¹⁸ so he left Mecca on September 8, 680 (8th Dul Hijjah)¹⁹ for Iraq, pursued by Yazid's forces which blocked any chance of his return.²⁰

The Imam had sent a letter with Qays bin Mashar Saidawi to notify the people of his impending arrival, but Ibn Ziyad, Yazid's appointed governor in al-Kufah, had Qays arrested, and when he lauded Imam Hussein (AS) and refused to curse Imam Ali (AS), Ibn Ziyad had him thrown off a roof, breaking all of his bones, in a deliberate attempt to terrorize the citizens of al-Kufah. The terror tactic worked, and when the news of Qays' death and the people's reaction reached Imam

Hussein, he lamented, “Our supporters have withdrawn their support from us. Whoever wishes to leave us and go his way should do so.”²¹

When Imam Hussein (AS) arrived with his band of 72 companions on the plains of Karbala, Iraq on October 2, 680 (2nd of Muharram 61 AH), Yazid had already amassed a huge army of troops at al-Kufah, with 4,000 under the command of Amr ibn Hajjaj blocking access to the water of the Euphrates.²² By the 9th of Muharram, the day before Ashura, the Imam’s camp was encircled by over 20,000 of Yazid’s troops who had been ordered by Ibn Ziyad to either obtain the oath of loyalty from Hussein (AS) or kill him, and in spite of these terrifying circumstances, the Imam continued to speak to his companions with composure and confidence.²³ Throughout the evening and night of the 10th of Muharram (October 9, 680), Imam Hussein and his followers prayed to Allah, sought forgiveness and prepared themselves for the battle the next day, Ashura, with Yazid’s army, which by then numbered over 30,000.²⁴

On the morning of the 10th, Imam Hussein (AS) addressed Yazid’s army at length, pointing out that he was the grandson of the Prophet; that he had neither killed anyone from among them giving cause for revenge, nor had he usurped anyone’s wealth. Concluding the Imam declared, “I will not swear allegiance to these people ... I seek refuge in Allah from the mischief of you people and of every arrogant person who does not believe in the Day of Judgment.” When the Imam had finished speaking, Umar ibn Sad shot an arrow towards the Imam’s followers and arrogantly announced, “I have started the battle before anyone else.”²⁵

Heavy fighting continued until the time for noon prayers when the Imam (AS) offered Salat ul-Khawf, a shortened prayer recited in such life-threatening situations as on a battlefield, after which the remaining brave young men were martyred by Yazid’s forces, along with children and even infants. While the exact number of fatalities is not known, most narrators agree that at least 72 from the companions and family of the Imam embraced martyrdom and possibly as many as 122 were slaughtered.²⁶ By the end of the day, the battle at Karbala was over and Yazid’s army believed they were the victors, but were they really? Eventually, even Yazid himself realized he had made a grievous error.²⁷ He was tormented by nightmares and guilt; often crying out and asking himself why had he ordered the killing of Hussein (AS).²⁸

This brings us to the central point: Since historically speaking, the battle at Karbala on Ashura appears similar to numerous other conflicts that have occurred before and since, what is it about this tragedy that made it unique in the annals of Islam?²⁹ The answer is that the saga of Imam Hussein’s valiant battle against the tyranny and oppression of the Banu Ummayah did not die after his martyrdom; rather the courageous surviving members of the Imam’s Ahlul Bayt immediately, while still in captivity, began spreading the story of his heroic struggle for justice far and wide, inspiring others with their eloquence, dignified demeanor and determination in exposing the truth about the shameful nature and sinister acts of Yazid’s debased regime.³⁰

Lady Zaynab, daughter of Imam Ali (AS), was especially eloquent. Condemning Yazid in his own court in Damascus, she asked him, “Do you think that by killing the godly persons you have become great and respectable and the Almighty looks at you with special grace and kindness?” Near the end of her brilliant oratory she swore to Yazid, “I swear by Allah that the shame and disgrace which you have earned by the treatment you meted out to us cannot be eradicated.”³¹

In short, the members of Ahlul Bayt and their loyal followers transformed the narrative of Imam Hussein's martyrdom at Karbala into a timeless message that has inspired oppressed people to revolt against tyranny and oppression over the course of history. As the Prophet of Islam (S) himself said, "Indeed, Hussein is the lamp for guidance and the ark for salvation."³²

Endnotes

- ¹ Ibrahim Ayati, *A Probe into the History of Ashura* (Karachi: Islamic Seminary Publications, 1991), 62.
- ² Ibrahim Ayati, *ibid.*, 144.
- ³ Sultanu'l-Wa'izin Shirazi, *Shiah Islam in Sunni Traditions: A Translation of Peshawar Nights*, trans. Charles Campbell and Hamid Quinlan (Dallas: Texas Islamic Press, 1997), 197.
- ⁴ Ian I. Mitroff and Warren Bennis, *The Unreality Industry: The Deliberate Manufacturing of Falsehood and What It Is Doing to Our Lives* (New York: Birch Lane, 1989), 152.
- ⁵ Zainul-Abidin Razavi, *Sayings of Imam Husayn* (Qum: Ansariyan, 2011), 7.
- ⁶ Heinz Halm, *Shi'ism*, trans. Janet Watson and Marion Hill (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 6.
- ⁷ Baqir Shareef al-Qurashi, *The Life of Imam Ali ibn Abi-Talib*, trans. Badr Shahin (Qum: Ansariyan, 2010), 103.
- ⁸ Heinz Halm, *ibid.*, 5.
- ⁹ Heinz Halm, *ibid.*, 6,7.
- ¹⁰ Heinz Halm, *ibid.*, 9.
- ¹¹ Baqir Shareef al-Qurashi, *ibid.*, 316.
- ¹² Baqir Shareef al-Qurashi, *ibid.*, 320.
- ¹³ Baqir Shareef al-Qurashi, *ibid.*, 326-328.
- ¹⁴ Heinz Halm, *ibid.*, 10.
- ¹⁵ *A Brief History of the Fourteen Infallibles* (Qum: Ansariyan, 2008), 59.
- ¹⁶ Baqir Shareef al-Qurashi, *ibid.*, 418.
- ¹⁷ *A Brief History of the Fourteen Infallibles*, 89.
- ¹⁸ *A Brief History of the Fourteen Infallibles*, 98.
- ¹⁹ Ibrahim Ayati, *ibid.*, 85.
- ²⁰ Heinz Halm, *ibid.*, 13,14.
- ²¹ Ibrahim Ayati, *ibid.*, 86.
- ²² Ibrahim Ayati, *ibid.*, 94, 95.
- ²³ Ibrahim Ayati, *ibid.*, 98.
- ²⁴ Ibrahim Ayati, *ibid.*, 104.
- ²⁵ Ibrahim Ayati, *ibid.*, 108.
- ²⁶ A.K. Ahmed, *The Hidden Truth about Karbala* (Qum: Ansariyan, 2009), 222.
- ²⁷ Ibrahim Ayati, *ibid.*, 120.
- ²⁸ A.K. Ahmed, 279.
- ²⁹ Ibrahim Ayati, *ibid.*, 115.
- ³⁰ Ibrahim Ayati, *ibid.*, 117.
- ³¹ Ibrahim Ayati, *ibid.*, 157, 159.
- ³² Zainul-Abidin Razavi, *ibid.*, 22.