

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

Imam Husayn's Philosophy and Karbala

By
Dr. Syed H. Akhtar
Austin, Texas

The very mention of the name of Imam Husayn (peace be upon him), the son of the Commander of the Faithful, Ali bin Abu Talib (peace be upon him), and the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny), the last Prophet of God, evokes strong emotions. But what was Husayn's philosophy? What did he stand for? What did he teach us?

Before those questions can be answered, a brief review of the political situation at that time will be helpful. Yazid, the son of Muawiya, had assumed rulership of the Islamic Empire and wielded absolute power over the people. Yazid was the embodiment of vice, tyranny, and injustice, and was openly anti-Islamic in his behavior. His campaign of deceit and false propaganda had misled the Muslim masses. Ignorance about true Islam was widespread. The true position of the members of the family of the Prophet was concealed from the common people. Against this backdrop, Yazid desired to legitimize his corrupt rule by demanding that Husayn submit and swear allegiance to him, or be killed.

Husayn explicitly declared that an Imam, and an embodiment of all that is good, could not swear allegiance to what was evil and false. He clearly understood that Yazid was determined to kill him for his refusal to submit to him. As a result, Husayn had few choices: he could gather forces and fortify himself in Medina or Mecca and try to escape or resist Yazid's power; he could go out in force and try to overthrow Yazid's government; or, he could take an open and public moral stand against Yazid's corruption, and probably die a martyr.

Imam Husayn knew that avoiding confrontation would only allow Yazid's defacement of Islamic values to continue unchecked. He also knew that a military victory would have only short term success, and would not save Islam in the long run, because it would not reform the morally complacent Muslim nation. He also did not want to die in vain, and be portrayed as one who unsuccessfully tried to defeat Yazid in order to simply gain power.

Thus, Husayn chose to confront Yazid in the open and on purely moral grounds. He took with him a small band of family members and companions, which included not only the able-bodied, but also the elderly and infirm, as well as women, children, and infants. According to Arab tradition, if it were simply his intention to fight, he would not have brought women and small children with him.

Imam Husayn and his male supporters, including the elderly and children, numbered less than 100, and were mercilessly slaughtered in the desert plains of Karbala on the tenth day of the month of Muharram, in the year 61 of the Islamic calendar, by Yazid's forces, numbering 10,000 strong. They were denied the most basic necessities, including water, and died fighting bravely in a state of hunger, thirst, and in utterly inhumane circumstances. Many minors perished of thirst. The women and the remaining children were taken as prisoners, subjected to torture and humiliation, and were presented before Yazid in his court.

Imam Husayn, as the spiritual leader of the Muslims, taught us that a leader must uphold the highest principles, the purest heart, and total submission to Divine Will. He should be able to inspire his followers to make the ultimate sacrifice, if necessary. He must have the understanding of the socio-political and religious situation at hand and choose the best course of action, and have foresight and knowledge of its consequences, in achieving his goal.

The goal in the case of Imam Husayn's struggle was saving true Islam from permanent defacement or, worse, obliteration. In martyrdom, he achieved glowing success, by exemplifying true Islam, and by exposing injustice and tyranny. His goal was not militarily defeating Yazid or toppling his Empire. Imam Husayn intended to bring about an enduring revolution, through which the forces of oppression, tyranny, and evil would be weakened forever, the truth would be manifest, and the difference between a false leader and a true leader (an Imam) would be clearly demonstrated. Imam Husayn achieved all these objectives, and more. He taught us that human dignity and freedom are more valuable than life, and that death in defending these values was preferable to a life of humiliation and disgrace.

In his letters to the Muslims of Kufa and Basra in Iraq, who had invited him to come, he showed his philosophy as the Imam and true leader of Muslims, in these words:

From Husayn bin Ali to the believers and Muslims (of Iraq): You have invited me to come to you because you have no imam to guide you, and you hope my arrival there will unite you in the right path and in the truth. You must be clear about the fact that the imam can only be one who follows the Book of God, makes justice and honesty his conduct and behavior, judges with truth, and devotes himself to the service of God. ...

I have sent my messenger to you and I call you to the Book of God, and the Sunna of His Prophet, the Sunna which has become obliterated; innovations have become active and energetic. If you

listen to me and obey my orders, I will guide you to the right path.
May the peace and mercy of God be upon you.

Husayn showed us that religion is not mere ritualistic worship, but appropriate action at the time of need, and sacrificing whatever is necessary to defend one's faith and principles.

Anita Rai, in her book, "Krukshetra, Calvary, and Karbala" aptly describes the state of the Muslims at the time of Imam Husayn:

Those who in such times opted for an easy alternative, in which they sought paradise in closed cloisters of the mosques, in lengthy prayers, recitals, and fasts. In time of crisis, when the love of truth demands sacrifice and sincerity, not conquests and conversions in the acquisition of booty, these people retreated to the dark hollows of mosques, ignoring every sense of responsibility and obligation. When the best Muslims were slain by the Umayyads, the devout fled the field of struggle and crawled under the prayer mats and entangled their souls with the rituality of beads and beards.

As the followers of Imam Husayn, let us be Muslims of action, let us struggle against our evil desires, and whatever else is evil around us. Let us avoid complacency and excessive pleasures, and let us place love of God above all else. For the love of God did Imam Husayn sacrifice everything gladly, even his six-month-old son, Ali Asghar. Let us not stop at mourning, shedding tears, Maatam, and Taazia for Imam Husayn (although these are very important), but let us rise above these rituals by learning from the philosophy behind them, and by implementing the teachings of Imam Husayn.

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