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O Allah, bless Muhammad & his Progeny*

Imam Husayn's Mission: Reforming the Ummah

by: Agha Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi

The supreme sacrifice by Husayn bin 'Ali, his family and companions in Karbala is rightly considered as the epoch-making event in the history of Islam. And so it to understand why Imam Husayn bin 'Ali (a.s.) sacrificed his family and friends by refusing to pledge allegiance to Yazid bin Mu'awiyah.

Why Husayn Sacrificed?

The best way to know the reason of Imam Husayn's sacrifice is to study his own words. The most important among his sayings concerning this issue is the will which Husayn wrote and left with his brother, Muhammad al-Hanafiyya. I consider this document as "a statement of purpose" of Husayn's revolution. Imam Husayn wrote:

I have taken this stand not out of arrogance or pride, neither out of mischief or injustice.

I have risen to seek reformation in the community of my grandfather.

I would like to bid good and forbid evil, and follow the tradition of my grandfather and my father 'Ali bin Abi Talib.

In this will, Husayn pinpoints the problem that the Muslim *ummah* faced and the solution which he had adopted to solve that problem. The problem was that the *ummah* was gradually moving away from the pure teachings of Islam, that Islam was preserved in form only but the spirit was being deformed. The solution, as Husayn saw it, was to implement the Islamic principles of *amr bil ma'ruf* (bidding the good) and *nahi 'anil munkar* (forbidding the evil), and also to show the pure and uncorrupted way of the Prophet of Islam as preserved and taught by 'Ali bin Abi Talib.

The Problem

The greatest tragedy which can befall a faith-based community is its indifference to emergence of rulers who openly talk and act against the fundamentals of its faith. More so, when such a ruler also assumes the office of caliphate, the highest religious authority. When Yazid sat on the throne of caliphate, the Muslim *ummah* was passing through a similar sense of indifference or hopelessness: the majority, out of ignorance and misinformation, just accepted the status quo; others, while aware of the situation, remained silent out of fear of persecution.

No ruler before Yazid had the audacity to openly deny the basic fundamentals of Islam. Yazid did not believe in the prophethood of Prophet Muhammad, and he ascribed material motives to the Prophet's mission. He openly expressed his belief by reciting the following poem when Imam Husayn's head was presented to him. In the poem, Yazid first addressed his infidel ancestors who were killed by Muslims in the battle of Badr¹ and calls upon them to witness the revenge he had taken for their death by killing the Prophet's grandson. Then he says,

*The Hashimites staged a play to gain the kingdom
For no news came [from God] nor any revelation
descended.²*

In another poem addressed to his lover, Yazid rejects the belief in resurrection and life hereafter:

*O my beloved! Do not believe in meeting me after
death,*

*Because what you have been told about
resurrection*

*For reckoning of our deeds is only a myth
To make you forget the pleasures of this real world.³*

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Husayn bin 'Ali (a.s.) saw the emergence of such a person as the greatest danger to Islam. He knew that as the true successor of the Prophet, it was his duty to warn the Muslim community.

The Solution

The solution to this problem was based on two social principles of Islam: bidding the good (*amr bi 'l-ma'ruf*) and forbidding the evil (*nahi 'ani 'l-munkar*). However, the implementation of these principles took different forms.

The **first step** of Husayn was to reject the demand made by Yazid to pledge allegiance to him. In response to Yazid's demand (through his governor in Medina, Walid bin 'Atba), Imam Husayn answered in three parts:

Husayn began by describing his own background: "I belong to the house of prophethood, the source of messengership, the place where angels used to descend and where [Allah's] mercy came to rest..."

Then he mentioned the character of Yazid by saying, "Whereas Yazid is a sinful person, a drunkard, a killer of innocent lives, and one who openly indulges in sinful acts."

Finally, he concludes by saying, "A person like me cannot pledge allegiance to a person like him."

The **second step** was to let the Muslim world know about his rejection of Yazid. During the days when there were no newspapers, radios, or T.V.s, Imam Husayn decided to use the medium of pilgrims to convey his message. There is no doubt that Husayn left Medina because his life was in danger, and that he chose Mecca because it is considered by the Qur'an as a refuge and a place of asylum for everyone. But one should not ignore the fact that Mecca was also the center of hajj. The annual pilgrimage availed itself as an opportunity for Husayn to meet people from different parts of the Muslim world and inform them about his views concerning Yazid. On their return, the pilgrims would surely mention this very significant news to their own people.

The **third step** was to give a shock treatment to the slumbering conscience of the Muslim *ummah*. Husayn bin 'Ali gave the shock treatment in two ways:

Firstly, by leaving Mecca on 8th of Dhul-hijja, just a day before the commencement of hajj ceremonies. The Imam obviously did so because he was informed that Yazid had sent assassins dressed as pilgrims to murder him even if they found him at the holy Ka'ba. But there seems to be a reason for selecting that particular day for departure from Mecca. By leaving Mecca just a day be-

fore hajj ceremonies, the Imam was forcing the indifferent Muslims to think why would the grandson of the Prophet leave Mecca before completing the hajj. This line of thought would eventually lead to the conclusion that in Husayn's views, Yazid does not deserve to be the leader of the Muslim community.

Secondly: by the supreme sacrifice at Karbala. Husayn not only gave his own life, but also those of his sons, brothers, relatives, and friends. Husayn and his small group of followers chose a honourable death over a life of disgrace under a tyrant like Yazid. This small group of just above a 100 people faced at least 30,000 soldiers of Yazid's army; and in spite of three days of thirst, they bravely fought and gained the glory of martyrdom.

The **fourth**, and final step, in Husayn's plan was to make sure that the reason for his sacrifice is correctly told to the people. For this, he had taken along the children and women of his own family. These children and women —of the Prophet's family— were made captives by the Yazidi army and taken from Karbala to Kufa and then from Kufa to Damascus. Yazidi officers displayed their captives in humiliating manner so as to serve as a warning against anyone who dared to oppose Yazid. However, they did not realize that this also provided the opportunity to Zaynab and Umm Kulthum (the sisters of Husayn) to present their side of the story to the public in Kufa, at various stops on the way to Damascus, in Damascus, and in the palace of Yazid itself.

Yazid won the battle but he lost the war because he did not achieve his objective which was to get the pledge of allegiance from Husayn. On the other hand, Husayn, even in death, achieved his goal of awakening the slumbering conscience of the Muslim *ummah* and letting the people know that they cannot stay indifferent when persons like Yazid become their rulers. The movement which started against Yazid in particular and the Umayyids in general is the greatest testimony to Husayn's victory. The main slogan used by the people in overthrowing the Umayyid dynasty was "*Ya li tha'rati 'l-Husayn* — In revenge for Husayn".

The reason for Husayn's sacrifice was to reform the Muslim *ummah* and awaken its slumbering conscience. Husayn could not tolerate the indifference which the Muslims showed in the issue of leadership. In one of his memorable short speech in which he addressed the Yazidi troops under the command of Hurr, Imam Husayn says:

"O men! Verily the Prophet of Islam said, 'If someone sees a cruel ruler who...disregards his duty..and acts among the people sinfully and aggressively, and that person does not do anything, in action or speech, to change the situation—then, it would be right for God [on the day of judgement] to place such an indifferent person alongside the tyrant ruler.'"

The Purpose of 'Azadari

The above understanding of the philosophy of Husayn's sacrifice helps us in outlining the purpose of the 'azadari (mourning rituals) which has been recommended by the Imams of Ahlu 'l-bayt who came after Husayn. The purpose of 'azadari cannot be different from the purpose of the sacrifice of Husayn.

We have outlined the main purpose of Imam Husayn's supreme sacrifice in Karbala. That same objective should be the purpose of 'azadari. We can, therefore, say that the purpose of 'azadari is:

- to constantly reform ourselves and our society from good to better and from better to best forms by fulfilling the most important social principles of Islam known as bidding the good (*amr bi 'l-ma'ruf*) and forbidding the evil (*nahi 'ani 'l-munkar*);
- to learn and follow the way of the Prophet as preserved and taught by Imam 'Ali bin Abi Talib and the other Imams.

On the whole, the institution of 'azadari has been the backbone of the Shi'a community in educating its members about their religion. The immense sympathy which a Shi'ah feels towards the martyrs of Karbala works as a magnet in pulling him or her to the *majalis* and other ceremonies of 'azadari. Experience has shown that in the memorial services to mourn Hussain, the organizers do not have to go out of their way to promote it or urge the people to participate. The love which the Shi'ahs have for Imam Husayn pulls them to such programs. The story is quite different when the same organizers arrange a lecture or an academic program, even if the lecturer is a very learned 'alim or scholar.

The psychological and emotional attachment which the Shi'ahs have towards the 'azadari of Imam Husayn is a very precious and valuable tool to implement the purpose of 'azadari outlined above. History of the Shi'ah

people in different parts of the world will bear out the fact that azadari has been the single most important media of mass religious education. This is not to deny that some people or community might be going through the 'recession' as far as the productivity of azadari ceremonies are concerned, but one should not assume from his or her local circumstances that 'azadari all over the world is waste of community's time, money and energy!

Counting the value of 'azadari in dollar terms is result of ignoring its psychological and emotional aspects. (I am convinced that any attempt towards eliminating the program of 'azadari, and diverting its time and energy to other aspects —e.g., academic or charitable works— is bound to fail and will not be as productive.) Instead of taking such negative attitude, this writer believes that steps should be taken to improve the productivity and the quality of the institution of 'azadari. The institution of 'azadari is like a school, and if there is a problem in it then the right approach is not to eliminate the school but to identify its weak points and strengthen it accordingly.

The organizers, the audience, and, above all, the speakers need to focus on the purpose of 'azadari itself: (1) reforming the community by bidding the good and forbidding the evil; (2) following the Islam of Muhammad as preserved by 'Ali and the Imams. Our *ma}alis*, our *nawha*, our *marsiya*, our *matam*, and our processions should all be moving us —intellectually, spiritually and emotionally— towards those two purposes. Only then will we be able to achieve the maximum out of the institution of 'azadari, and to fulfill our pledge to Imam Husayn that "had we been in Karbala with you, we would have sacrificed our lives also."

Notes:

1. The battle of Badr took place in 2 A.H.; it was the first battle between the infidels of Mecca and the Muslims of Medina, The infidels of Mecca were led by 'Atba bin Rabi'ah, the great-grandfather of Yazid. 'Atba was killed by Hamzah (uncle of the Prophet), and 'Atba's son was killed by 'Ali bin Abi Talib.
2. Sibti ibn al-Jawzi, *Tadhkiratu Khawasi 'l-Ummah*, p. 261; at-Tabari, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 3, p. 2174.
3. Sibti ibn al-Jawzi, *Tadhkiratu Khawasi 'l-Ummah*, p. 291

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**“Verily those who hurt Allah and His Messenger,
Allah curses them in this world and the hereafter,
and He has prepared for them a humiliating chastisement.”
(The Qur’an 33:57)**