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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.

No serious historian would question this event or its importance. In this article, I would like to understand and explain why Imam Husayn bin 'Ali (a.s.) sacrificed his family and friends by refusing to pledge allegiance to Yazid bin Mu'awiya'. To understand the philosophy of Husayn's sacrifice is an important issue on its own, but it becomes more important when we realize that the philosophy or reason for the memorial ceremonies (Azadari) of Muharram is also inter-twined with it.

## **Was It For Shafa'at Of The Shi'ahs?**

Many ordinary Shi'ahs think that Husayn made the sacrifice in order to gain the light to intercede with Allah on behalf of the Shi'ahs and those who love the Ahl ul-Bayt. This is very similar to the idea of Christianity which says that Jesus gave his life for salvation (read, for forgiveness of sins) of anyone who believes in him.

On the one hand, I do not deny the concept of Shafa'a nor the fact that Husayn and other Imams of Ahl ul-Bayt have the right to intercede on behalf of their true followers. (The Qur'an, while negating the intercession by the idols, has confirmed the right of intercession for those who are authorized by Allah). However, on the other hand, I do not agree that Imam Husayn sacrificed himself, his children and friends, and put his womenfolk in a situation where they were made prisoners for the sake of Shafa'a or intercession.

I do not believe so simply because Husayn had the right of Shafa'a from the day he was born. A person would not sacrifice in this manner to gain something which he already possesses! The following event at the birth of Husayn proves my point dearly:

At the birth of Husayn, bin 'Ali, Allah ordered the angels to descend to the earth and congratulate the Prophet on the birth of his grandson. On the way, the angels passed by an island on which an angel,

known as Fitrus, had been banished. Fitrus had tarried in the task given to him and, therefore, lost his wings and was banished to an island. Fitrus requested Jibra'il to take him along to the Prophet so that the latter may intercede with God on his behalf. When Jibra'il brought Fitrus to the Prophet and explained his situation, the Prophet told Fitrus to touch the new-born baby, Husayn. (According to other narrations, the Prophet told Fitrus to touch the cradle of Husayn).

As soon as Fitrus touched the body (or cradle) of Husayn, he got his wings back and flew away saying: 'Who can be like me? I have been delivered by Husayn bin 'Ali'. Commenting on this incident, Shaykh Tusi, says, "And, similarly, we seek deliverance through the shrine of Husayn"[1](#).

This event, besides all other evidences about the Shafa'a of the Imams of Ahl ul-Bayt, shows that Imam Husayn himself had the power of intercession from the day he was born. Therefore, seeking the right of Shafa'a could not have been the reason for Husayn's stand against Yazid.

## **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 alHanafiyya. 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 reform in the community of my grandfather. I would like to bid good, forbid evil, and follow the tradition of my grandfather and my father 'Ali bin Abi Talib.

In this will, Husayn pin-points 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 being led away from the pure teachings of Islam, that Islam was preserved in form but the spirit was being deformed. The solution, as Husayn saw it, was to implement the Islamic principles of *amr bi'l-ma'ruf* (bidding the good) and *nahi 'an'il 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 community whose social system is based on religion is its indifference to the 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, 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 Husayn's head was presented to him. In this poem, he first addressed his infidel ancestors who were killed by Muslims in the battle of Badr<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

Husayn bin 'Ali (A) 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 'an'il 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 begins by a description of his own background by saying: '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 mentions 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 day after Husayn gave this response to Walid, Marwan bin Hakar (the head of Umayyids in Medina) tried to persuade the Imam by saying that pledging allegiance to Yazid would be "good for you in this world as well as in the hereafter" Imam Husayn replied by saying, "Then we should bade farewell to Islam if a ruler like Yazid is imposed upon the Ummah"

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 before Hajj ceremonies, the Imam was forcing the indifferent Muslims to think why the grandson of the Prophet would leave Mecca before completing the Hajj. This line of thought would eventually lead to the conclusion that in Husayn 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 an 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 objection which was to get his recognition by 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 al-Husayn! – In revenge for Husayn!".

In the final analysis, the reason for Husayn's sacrifice was not to gain the right of Shafa'ah which he already possessed, but 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 Ahl ul-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 azidari 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'ah 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 programs to mourn Husayn, 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 the martyrs of Karbala 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 is 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!

The purpose of Azadari cannot be different from the purpose of the sacrifice of Husayn. 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 reform it.

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 for bidding the evil;
- (2) Following the Islam of Muhammad as preserved by 'Ali.

Our majalis, our nawha and marsiya, and our matam 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!”

1. This incident has been quoted on the authority of Shaykh as-Saduq and Shaykh at-Tusi by Shaykh 'Abbas al-Qummi, *Nafas al-Mahmum* [Tehran: M.I, 1368 AH (solar)] p. 7. Also see his *Muntaha al-Amal*.
2. 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 'Atha bin Rabi'ah, the great-grandfather of Yazid. 'Atha was killed by Hamzah (uncle of the Prophet), and 'Atba's son was killed by 'Ali bin Abi Talib.
3. Sibt Ibn al Jawzi, *Tadhkiratu Khawasi '1-Ummah*, p. 261; at Tabari, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 3, p. 2174.
4. Sibt Ibn al Jawzi, *Tadhkiratu Khawasi '1-Ummah*, p. 291.

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