

Karbala in Our Time and its Relevance to the Message of the Qur'an

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This article has been written as a result of a barrage of comments and questions appearing on the internet trying to question and actually oppose the solemn and peaceful observance of the Muharram ceremonies. This is an enhanced version of a chapter from my book titled The Tragedy Of Karbala, published in 1992 and available from amazon.com. It also has some material taken from my second book titled: Understanding Karbala, published in 2007, and some new material.



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The article is not written to impress any specific sect or religious or non-religious group. The whole purpose is to show the relevance of the Tragedy of Karbala to not only the world Muslim community but also to propagate the real message to the big wide world. At the same time, its purpose is to relate it to the message of the Qur'an.

Let us first discuss the issue from the point-of-view of the new generation of Muslims whose parents are actually trying to raise their children (mainly in the western societies) with the influence of Love of Ahlul-Bayt– the community which actually actively observes the Muharram with all its ritual as well as spiritual underpinnings. This follows the Qur'anic command in verse 42:23:

ذَٰلِكَ الَّذِي يُبَشِّرُ اللَّهُ عِبَادَهُ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ ۖ قُلْ لَا أَسْأَلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ أَجْرًا إِلَّا الْمَوَدَّةَ فِي الْقُرْبَىٰ ۗ وَمَن يَقْتَرِفْ حَسَنَةً نَّزِدْ لَهُ فِيهَا حُسْنًا ۖ إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ شَكُورٌ (٤٢:٢٣)

“That ‘reward’ is the good news which Allah gives to His servants who believe and do good. Say, ‘O Prophet,’ ‘I do not ask you for a reward for this ‘message’—only honour for ‘our’ kinship.” I Whoever earns a good deed, We will increase it in goodness for them. Surely Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Appreciative.” (42:23)

I will draw the reader’s attention to my book titled: The House Love, which elaborates all the implied meanings in this and some other Qur’anic verses.

The other day I was discussing this with an eighteen-year old. He expressed his feelings freely and said that while the whole gathering in the majlis was weeping and wailing he found it difficult to do that. According to him, every time he hears the story of Karbala he feels more anger than grief. I am sure that eighteen-year old is not alone in this experience of his. There would be other young men and women in our community who have this anger in them. It was this very anger which caused frequent uprisings against the Umayyads in the few years following the tragedy of Karbala. It was the wisdom, the farsightedness and the concern for the community's good in our Imams and their strong and charismatic leadership which harnessed this anger into organized lamentation, weeping and wailing, and thus saved the community from complete destruction. They continued their leadership roles throughout their lives in spite of the fact that most of them were persecuted and harassed by the rulers; they spent their lives either in prison or under house-arrest. No less were the sacrifices made by the members of our community at large, in maintaining the practice of lamentation in public and the travel to Karbala (Ziyarat), against all odds and in all times. These two things, lamentation in public and Ziyarat, are the life-blood of our community and it is through these two institutions that we have existed as a viable community, in spite of being a minority, for the last thirteen hundred years.

Having said all that, we must add that lamentation, weeping and wailing are not the end in themselves, and instead, these things are the means to achieve a higher and more meaningful

end. That end is no more and no less than applying the events of Karbala to our own lives in our present time, doing a continued self-assessment and trying to see if Karbala had happened in our time, which side we would have been on. If we come regularly to mourning gatherings in Muharram and sit and listen to speeches attentively and then go back home and indulge in all kinds of un-Islamic practices then that is no good. It means that we are following the rituals without applying the spirit and the lessons of Karbala to our own lives.

Let us look at the story of Wahab Kalbi where we find this point so explicitly and wonderfully emphasized. A Christian boy of hardly 18, just married, returning to his home town with his middle aged mother and a new bride, meets Imam Husayn on his way to Iraq. He is thoroughly impressed by Imam Husayn's devotion to truth and standing up for basic human rights and values. He abandons everything, his new life with the new bride, his mother and all. He even abandons his religion and comes to the side of Imam Husayn – and for what? To give his life for Imam Husayn and achieve martyrdom.

Of course, martyrdom is a purely Qur'anic concept. But it is not that someone would just go and kill himself. No, it is the act of standing up for truth and then opposing all tyranny and falsehood and actually dying for that cause.

وَلَا تَحْسَبَنَّ الَّذِينَ قُتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ أَمْوَاتًا بَلْ أَحْيَاءٌ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ يُرْزَقُونَ (٣:١٦٩)

Think not of those who are slain in Allah's way as dead. Nay, they are alive, finding their sustenance in the nearness of their Lord; (Qur'an, 3:169).

There are many Muslims who are unable to comprehend the inner meaning of Karbala, while there are a handful of non-Muslims who have gone out of their way to understand it and have succeeded in doing that.

At the same time, the story of Hur ibn Yazid ar-Riyahi is equally discernible. A commander in Yazid's army of 2,000 strong cavalry brigade, who came to intercept Imam

Husayn as he was proceeding to Iraq, finally decided to change sides and join Imam Husayn and his small troops, fought against his own employers and gave his life for Islam.

This year (2012) it is expected that more than ten million people will visit the shrine of Imam Husayn at Karbala at the occasion of Arba'inside Imam Husayn.

Similarly, *ziyarat* is important for keeping the memory of Karbala alive, but it cannot replace *hajj*, which is compulsory (*wajib*) for every Muslim once in his or her lifetime if the means are available.

Karbala is the message of hope for every person and every community in the world who is oppressed, disenfranchised, tortured and dispossessed. The superiority of the spiritual force over tyranny and evil brute force is established in the Qur'an first, in the story of prophet Ibraheem, and then in the stories of other prophets. The concept of *imamat* is elaborated in that story.



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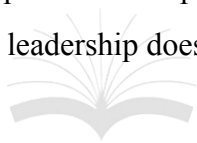
'Remember' when Abraham was tested by his Lord with 'certain' commandments, which he fulfilled. Allah said, "I will certainly make you into a role model for the people." Abraham asked, "What about my offspring?" Allah replied, "My covenant is not extended to the wrongdoers." (2:124)

The details of Ibraheem's trial are recorded in chapter 37.

رَبِّ هَبْ لِي مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ (٣٧:١٠٠) فَبَشَّرْنَاهُ بِغُلَامٍ حَلِيمٍ (٣٧:١٠١) فَلَمَّا بَلَغَ مَعَهُ السَّعَىٰ قَالَ يَبْنَئِي إِنِّي
أَرَىٰ فِي الْمَنَامِ أَنِّي أَذْبَحُكَ فَانْظُرْ مَاذَا تَرَىٰ ۚ قَالَ يَٰأَبَتِ افْعَلْ مَا تُؤْمَرُ سَتَجِدُنِي إِن شَاءَ اللَّهُ مِنَ الصَّابِرِينَ
(٣٧:١٠٢) فَلَمَّا أَسْلَمَا وَتَلَّهُ لِلْجَبِينِ (٣٧:١٠٣) وَنَدَيْنَاهُ أَنِ يَا إِبْرَاهِيمُ (٣٧:١٠٤) قَدْ صَدَّقْتَ الرُّءْيَا إِنَّا كَذَلِكَ
نَجْزِي الْمُحْسِنِينَ (٣٧:١٠٥) إِنَّ هَذَا لَهُوَ الْبَلَاءُ الْمُبِينُ (٣٧:١٠٦) وَفَدَيْنَاهُ بِذَبْحٍ عَظِيمٍ (٣٧:١٠٧) وَتَرَكْنَا
عَلَيْهِ فِي الْآخِرِينَ (٣٧:١٠٨)

“‘My Lord! Bless me with righteous offspring.’ (37:100) So We gave him good news of a forbearing son. (37:101) Then when the boy reached the age to work with him, Abraham said, “O my dear son! I have seen in a dream that I ‘must’ sacrifice you. So tell me what you think.” He replied, “O my dear father! Do as you are commanded. Allah willing, you will find me steadfast.” (37:102) Then when they submitted ‘to Allah’s Will’, and Abraham laid him on the side of his forehead ‘for sacrifice’, (37:103) We called out to him, “O Abraham! (37:104) You have already fulfilled the vision.” Indeed, this is how We reward the good-doers. (37:105) That was truly a revealing test.(37:106) And We ransomed his son with a great sacrifice, (37:107) and blessed Abraham ‘with honourable mention’ among later generations. (37:108)”

Basically, the Qur’anic concept of Imamah is spiritual in its nature which overrides worldly politics. That place of *imamah* is bestowed by Allah to his chosen ones. And that kind of spiritual leadership does not go to any oppressor.



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The concept of *zibhin azeem* has been explained as the martyrdom at Karbala very early on in view of a number of hadith of the Prophet, and that has continued several centuries later. For example, the poet of the east, Allama Iqbal, has referred to it several times in his Urdu as well as Farsi poetry.

رغبیو اسدہور نیگنے ہدا اتس نرحم

اہنتی ایکس نیسح، ادتبا ےہ المسلیع

The story of Haram (the story of Ibraheem’s sacrifice at Mina) is strange, simple and colourful. It began with Isma’eel and concluded with Husayn

Iqbal’s philosophical discourse on Karbala manifests itself in a long Farsi poem.

اہل اہل ابے مسب اہل دیر
ینعم ذہب میطع آدم رسپ

How wonderful! Father (Imam Ali) is the 'B' of Bismillah while the son (Imam Husayn) is the meaning of zibhin azeem.

Actually in his long Farsi poem on Karbala, Iqbal goes on to elaborate the philosophy of Karbala much further.

وہمیس و رفوعن و ریش و زیدی
ان دو وقت از ایحت آدی دیدی

Moses and Pharaoh, and Shabbeer (Husayn) and Yazid are the two eternal opposing forces, representing 'Good' and 'Evil'.

زندہ قح از وقت ریشی اتس
ابلطآرخدا غرسحتریمیاتس

Shabbeer gave life to 'Good' (by his sacrifice), and 'Evil' at last, is dead forever.

ت خُگسیوچنالختقرہتشازرقآن
رحتی را زره ادنر اکم رتخی

When khilafat dissociated itself from the Qur'an, and Freedom was poisoned.

رُیخالمماختسانرسولجہ
وچن احسب ہلیق ابراں در دقم

Then appeared on the horizon of Islam, that Savior of all mankind, like a cloud full of rain

رب زنیع رکالب ابردی و رتف

الهل در وریابن اه اکر دی و رتف

It rained on the plain of Karbala and passed, it changed the desert into a blooming orchard and passed.

ات ایقتم عطق ادبتساد رکد

وم جوخناونمچالجدیرکد

He put an end to oppression for all time to come, he created an orchard by watering the sands with his blood.

لطفی دہاتس ربیقدر اخکو و خنغ سپانبے ئ ال اہل دریہد اتس

He is lying in dust, drenched in his own blood, for saving the truth; that is why he is said to be the very foundation of 'La Ilaah'

Iqbal is alluding to a quatrain attributed to another scholar and mystic of India, Khwaja Muceen Uddeen Chishti, in which he says that Husayn did not give his hand in Yazid's hand but gave his head instead, that is why he is the foundation of 'La Ilaah', (in other words he saved Islam from complete destruction).

That is how Iqbal has connected Karbala to our present times and all time to come. The forces of good and evil will always exist and be in conflict with each other at all times. There will always rise a Husayn to confront the Yazid of the time.

No Urdu poet beginning with Meer Taqi Meer and Ghalib to Josh Malihabadi, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Mustafa Zaidi, Parveen Shakir and Ahmad Faraz, has gone without discussing Karbala, one way or another. Each one of those poets have tried to relate Karbala to their own

times.

Even political leaders such as Gandhi, Stalin, the Quaid-e-Azam, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and many others have spoken about Karbala.

Of course, the devotees of Imam Husayn are influenced by the above-mentioned Qur'anic verses as well as the Prophet's hadith. One of such reports has said that the Prophet was informed of the event of Karbala in a *Hadith-e-Qudsi* in which Jibreel comes and tells the story to him, which aggrieves him greatly. He then relates it to his daughter, Fatima Zahra, who also is greatly aggrieved. But she asks a question: "Father, who will be there to mourn for my son." The Prophet replies: "My dear daughter, Allah will raise a community who would make it their lifestyle to mourn for your son."

The devotees of Imam Husayn do all the mourning and lamentation with the firm belief that the hadith of the Prophet has identified them as that chosen community. It has to be clarified that that community of mourners is not divided on sectarian lines. Muslims of many sects join in the mourning and lamentation during the month of Muharram every year.

Professor Mahmood Ayoub, who was at Temple University, Philadelphia, had written his Ph.D. thesis on this topic. That has since been published in book form. When somebody dies in a family, the family does not mourn their dead. Instead, they mourn Husayn and other martyrs of Karbala. Even when there is a wedding in a family, the celebrations are rounded off by a majlis of Husayn. One other aspect of this, which has yet to be studied by the scholars, is the effect of this regular mourning and lamentation on an individual. The individual is hardly ever stressed out, because any amount of psychological pressure can be released in weeping and wailing. Men of the strongest constitution, who would not flinch even when walking through flying bullets, can be seen weeping with tears and wailing uncontrollably at a majlis.

The Qur'an has identified the acts of weeping and wailing as natural instincts of man. In Chapter 12 of the Qur'an, when Prophet Yaqoob is separated from his son, Yusuf, he weeps so much that he goes blind.

وَكَظِيمٌ زَنَ فَهُيْ يُوسُفَ وَأَبِيَّ ضَّتْ عَيْنَاهُ مَنَ إِلَى عُلْسَفَى عَنْهُ مَ وَقَالَ يَا أُولَئِكَ (١٢:٨٤)

And he turned away from them (the other sons), and said: "How great is my grief for Joseph!"

And his eyes became white with sorrow, and he was a great suppressor of his grief.

Nowhere does the Qur'an say that Yaqoob did not do *sabr* (patience). Instead the Holy Qur'an is praising him, and has accepted grief, lamentation and mourning for a separated loved one as a natural human expression.

The active involvement of the non-Muslim population of India in the yearly observance of Muharram has bridged the Hindu-Muslim gap to a great extent, which exists at every level of the society. Many Hindu poets have been writing devotional poetry about Karbala.

Annemarie Schimmel has made a very interesting observation. Commenting on Mahmoud Ayoub's *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Ashura in Twelver Shi'ism (Religion and Society Series)*, one of the street drama scenes about Karbala, she says "In one of the scenes, both Hasan and Husayn are shown fighting together. This is historically incorrect but psychologically correct."

Here is a non-Muslim scholar who has observed a ritual, found it logically flawed but went deeper into its reason and meaning to understand the spirit behind it and has succeeded. Of course, Hasan died of poisoning ten years before Karbala and Husayn was killed in action. There is no way the two could have died fighting together. But because their devotees revere them both equally as Imams and both are heroes in their own circumstances, for their followers, the drama does convey a unified message.

There is strong evidence that Annemarie Schimmel had become a Muslim towards the

end of her life. She died on Jan. 25, 2003 at age 80.

For a non-Muslim spectator, the activities of the mourners look very intense and sometimes frightening. But, mourners are not violent. However, while writing on this topic, I discovered that the Encyclopedia Britannica has mentioned in passing that foreigners have been known to be man-handled by mourners. This is a misconception which requires clarification.

The whole idea of the elaborate display is to publicize Husayn's message. Non Muslim spectators are always most welcome to watch, ponder and ask questions. However, it is a solemn occasion and mourners do expect a certain degree of respect from the spectators. It is possible that a less educated and over enthusiastic mourner will take exception to an act of a spectator, which in his opinion is quite innocent.

There are various aspects of Karbala for us to study. One of the most important and meaningful messages from Karbala can be summarized as follows: There will always be people in every society who would be eager to usurp other people's rights for their own vested interests. At the same time, there would be the odd person who, in spite of all the prevailing social pressure, would stand up, protest and try to stop the wrong. And then, there would be the silent majority in the middle. Many of them would debate whether to join one party or the other, others would just stay out of 'trouble' by remaining neutral.

The Qur'an tells a very similar story in the tale of Ashaab-e-Sabt, or the people of Sabbath. '

إِنَّمَا جُعِلَ السَّبْتُ عَلَى الَّذِينَ اخْتَلَفُوا فِيهِ وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَيَحْكُمُ بَيْنَهُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَمَةِ فِيمَا كَانُوا فِيهِ يَخْتَلِفُونَ (١٦:١٢٤)

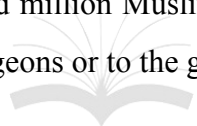
The Sabbath was only made (strict) for those who disagreed (as to its observance); But Allah will judge between them on the Day of Judgment, as to their differences. (Qur'an, 16:124)

There were three groups among the community who were commanded by the prophet of that time to follow the law of Sabbath strictly. One group disobeyed. A large number of them

joined them. A small minority tried to uphold the commandment but they became isolated by the majority's decision to stay neutral. That is what is meant by the word ikhtalifu in the verse.

Our readers can very easily identify those three groups of people in the story of Karbala. In most cases, the lone protestor would be deserted by his nearest and dearest and would be forced either to give up his crusade or face annihilation. This latter case is the making of a martyr like Husayn. In the very occasional case, circumstances would turn out to be favorable for the protest, a large majority would be swayed to follow the lone crusader and the movement would succeed. That would be a popular revolution.

We have examples of both cases in our times. The plight of the Algerian freedom fighters is known to everyone. A successful, democratic process was overturned by the military might of a powerful minority, with the connivance and help of the great powers of the world¹. The one thousand million Muslims in the world sat and watched as the popular leaders were either led to the dungeons or to the gallows.



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The most glowing example of a successful movement against tyranny and oppression is the 1979 Revolution in Iran. It is not surprising that some of the key events which materialized in the removal of the Shah were started in the month of Muharram, during the mourning and once on the day of Ashura itself. It was this movement which

¹This refers to the civil war in Algeria that continued between 1978-1991, after which the Islamic Salvation Front emerged as a viable democratic system but the military intervened and wiped out the FLIS with a very definite iron hand with support from western powers.

gave us the famous slogan of:

كل يوم عاشوراء وكل ارض كربلاء

Kullu yawmin Ashura wa kullu ardin Karbala.

That is, “Every day is Ashura, and every land is Karbala”. There are three main ingredients for any revolution to succeed. First comes extreme oppression by a tyrannical ruler or by a group of people, of a large majority, second, the resulting resentment in the oppressed people and their desire to do or die under a unified philosophy, third, strong, sincere and charismatic leadership. In our example, the first requirement was provided by the Shah and his police and spy network, the second by the Iranian population at large and their firm belief in Islam, the third was obviously fulfilled by Ayatullah Khomeini. More than anything else, it was the attitude, both in the people as well as in the leadership, expressed in that slogan which was responsible for the success of the revolution². These two cases we have just quoted were very clearly defined. But there are also a lot of gray areas. The prime example of that is the Gulf war of January-February 1991 and its aftermath. As long as the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) went on, the Western powers kept helping Iraq and backing Saddam up in their own interests, even Muslim rulers were helping Iraq instead of trying to resolve the conflict peacefully.

Let us just see here how this policy went totally against the Qur’anic commandments:

وَإِنْ طَائِفَتَانِ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ اقْتَتَلُوا فَأَصْلَحُوا بَيْنَهُمَا فَإِنْ بَغَتْ إِحْدَاهُمَا عَلَى الْأُخْرَىٰ فَقَاتِلُوا الَّتِي تَبْغِي حَتَّىٰ تَفِيءَ إِلَىٰ أَمْرِ اللَّهِ فَإِنْ فَاءَتْ فَأَصْلَحُوا بَيْنَهُمَا بِالْعَدْلِ وَأَقْسِطُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُقْسِطِينَ (٤٩:٩)

And if two groups of believers fight each other, then make peace between them. But if one of them transgresses against the other, then fight against the transgressing group until they ‘are willing to’ submit to the rule of Allah. If they do so, then make peace between both ‘groups’ in

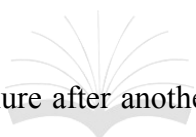
²For a full story of the success of the Iranian Revolution and the role of Ayatullah Khomeini, and how Ashura became a symbol for the revolutionary activists in that struggle, please peruse Mohamed H. Heikal’s book titled *The Return of the Ayatollah*.

all fairness and act justly. Surely Allah loves those who uphold justice. (Qur'an, 49:9)

Very much according to that commandment, Ayatullah Khumayni urged the Iraqi people to rise up against Saddam's despotic rule, but they were then divided on racial and sectarian lines. As soon as Saddam turned to Kuwait, everyone was fighting him. Once again, the Western powers were doing it in their own interests. But the Muslim countries which had been helping Iraq against Iran, were now sending their own troops to fight Iraq. Those who joined Iraq did it for the wrong reasons. Jordan did it because it was intimidated by Iraq's military might; the Palestinian leadership did it out of miscalculation and political ineptness, and North Yemen out of its anti-Capitalist fervor. The Muslim population in other countries held rallies in Saddam's support, once again, for wrong reasons and under misguided enthusiasm. The whole situation was so confusing that the average Muslim could not tell black from white. President George Herbert Walker Bush hinted to the Iraqi people that help would be forthcoming if they tried to overthrow Saddam (remember! Khumayni sent similar overtures in the 80's and nobody moved then). Iraqi people rose in arms. No help came from anywhere. The crusaders were brutally butchered by Saddam's loyalists. Once again, one thousand million Muslims watched as young men were killed, women, old men and children died (and are still dying as these lines are being written in 1992) of disease and hunger. The late uprising in Iraq has a direct parallel in its nature with the movement of the *tawwabun*, five years after the massacre at Karbala, and with the battle of Harra, outside of Medina, three years after Karbala. Had the *Tawwabun* been able to reach Husayn at Karbala, the end of that battle in the 61st year of Hijra, could have been totally different; had people of Medina showed support for Imam Husayn, he would have never travelled to Karbala in the first place and the people of Medina would have had a chance of winning against Yazid under Imam Husayn's leadership. Even if we set aside the religious and moral aspect of the situation, it could not be labelled anything other than a glaring miscalculation and political folly. Because it was those same people of Medina who were butchered and it was their women who were raped, it was their homes which were razed to the ground by Yazid's

forces soon after that³. Had the Iraqi uprising taken place in the mid-eighties, Saddam's game would be up much sooner, there would be peace in the region, there would be no more torture and killing in Iraq, no Kuwaiti occupation and thus no Gulf War, no starvation, and no disease.

Even during and after the Iraqi uprising, all the moral and military support went to the Kurds, who, in spite of their greater know-how and all the help, could not win; while those people who rose in arms in the cities of Karbala, Najaf, and Mosul etc., were totally ignored, because they belonged to a particular religious sect which had been a thorn in everybody's side for a long time, as if those people were not human. Not only were they brutally massacred by Saddam's Republican Guards, the whole country of Iraq is still under oppression including the Kurds, and to a higher degree. This is not very different from the people of Medina sending a commission of inquiry to Damascus and finding Yazid guilty of indulging in drinking, music and womanizing and ignoring the gross wrong of killing Husayn and his companions, and torturing his women and children.



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One failure after another and continuing hardship and misery have created the syndrome of 'blaming the other guy' among the Muslims communities of the world. It is very easy to blame somebody else for our hardships and misfortunes. The fact of the matter is that most of our miseries are self-inflicted. The main reason for this is that we have forgotten the high ideals of Islam.

Consider this: for the last 80 years, the population in the Middle East has been suffering from the Israel-Palestine issue. The oil-rich Muslim countries could not resolve the issue with all their wealth. The largest country with its huge army, Egypt, could not defeat the small Israeli Army in 1967. The country of Jordan was nearly destroyed, Syrians could not do anything either. Come the 1980's. An Israeli army convoy intercepted the Ashura *juloos* (commemoration ceremony) in Southern Beirut. The mourners were outraged. They could not, though, do anything against the well armed Israeli tank contingent. They waited until 2006. When The

³ For details of the Battle of Harra, please see History of Tabari or modern works such as Amir Ali, also see this website: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_al-Harrah.

Israeli army invaded southern Beirut once again, a rag-tag Hizbullah⁴ army of hardly 5,000 men were able to defeat the Israelis in full view of the world's most famous TV cameras. Who were those people? They were some of the mourners of Imam Husayn, who had entered the battlefield saying "*Labbayak ya Husayn!*"

We believe that it is just enough to recite the *kalemah*, pray five-times-a-day, fast for the thirty days in Ramadan and pay the *zakat*, and do *hajj* once, to be a Muslim. While in actual fact, all that is only the beginning of Islam. The actual Islam comes when we start applying the principles of the religion to our every-day life, sincerely and faithfully. Nowhere do we find a better example of this than at Karbala. That is why Karbala is so important for every Muslim. The hardships and miseries of the community will continue and, in fact, increase, as long as Muslims would continue to allow toadies and rogues to rule them and represent them in the global political arena, very much like the Muslims, thirteen hundred years ago, allowed a man like Yazid to come to power and they had to suffer the consequences.



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When an average educated and intelligent Muslim looks around, he finds that every country, every movement, every special-interest group, seems to have an axe to grind against Islam and Muslims. Consequently, Muslims find themselves politically isolated from the rest of the world. Should Muslims, then, feel that they are alone?

Well, if the seventy-two hungry and thirsty men did not feel that they were alone in the desert of Karbala thirteen hundred years ago then how can one thousand million feel today that they are alone?

Equally important are the lessons learned from Karbala at an individual level. When a person decides to confront a wrong, in the beginning he/she has the hope of winning his/her case against the oppressor. Then there comes a point when winning and worldly success become unimportant and the crusader fights for the right cause without any regard to the consequences.

⁴Readers beware! Hizbullah has been declared a terrorist group by the United States government.

This requires tremendous discipline, determination, perseverance, self-confidence and a deep desire to sacrifice everything and everyone near and dear, for the cause. Once again, we do not find this moral enacted so truly and fully anywhere else but at Karbala. Husayn's speech to his companions during the night of Ashura and their reaction to it shows that whole phenomenon so profoundly.

Then, at the group level: once a group of people have chosen a leader and decided to follow him, they cannot succeed in their mission unless they submit themselves to the will of the leader and follow him in whatever circumstances could develop. At Karbala, every fighter possessed a strong personality. But when it came to following Husayn, none of his companions thought of themselves. Their selves were merged with the person of Husayn. And it was thus that they confronted the wrong not as seventy-two but as one.

No less significant are the contributions made by the women and the little children at Karbala. Not a single report tells us that even the four-year old daughter of Husayn had shown any desire to get water in exchange for surrender to Yazid's will. She does complain of thirst but she is not willing to compromise her father's principles. Can a four year-old understand these things? The *maqtal* reports speak for themselves. Zaynab, Husayn's sister, who had lived in Medina and Kufa as a princess, had never ventured out on her own; all of a sudden, she finds her brothers, sons and nephews brutally killed, becomes a prisoner, and loses her belongings and even the cloak over her head. But instead of complaining and showing any feminine weakness, she takes the leadership of the plundered caravan and confronts Ibn Ziyad in Kufa, lashes out at Yazid at a royal court in Damascus and becomes the most vocal proponent of her murdered brother's mission⁵.

⁵Two books are worth mentioning here in this context. (1) Professor Akbar Hyder, who teaches Urdu at the University of Texas in Austin, did his Ph.D. from Harvard. His thesis is on his memories of growing up with the Karbala narrative. The thesis has since been published under the title: *Reliving Karbala* by the O.U.P. There is a specific chapter on *Women Of Karbala* in the book by (2) Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics), Princeton University Press, 2006.

As Husayn kept the whole family and his companions together during the ten days at Karbala, by his charismatic leadership, love and devotion to them, so did Zaynab in the following months after Husayn's murder.

At the same time, we cannot overlook the fact that the people of Banu Hashim were one family, and Husayn was the head of that family. It was under his leadership that the family had come to Karbala and had gone through all the hardships. Nowhere do we find that any member of the family had shown the slightest hesitation in following Husayn. In fact, at one point, Husayn addressed the brothers and nephews of Muslim ibn Aqeel saying that they should leave him since Muslim's murder at Kufa was sufficient sacrifice from their side. They are all reported to have insisted not only on staying but also fighting alongside their leader. Husayn showed tremendous love for all his children, brothers and nephews. But when it came to the Mission of his grandfather, the Prophet of Islam, he sacrifices them all, and they go with pleasure. He loved his four year-old daughter dearly. But when she tried to stop him from going to the battlefield by clinging to the hoofs of his horse, he picked her up and explained to her that it was absolutely essential for him to go and fight that battle. Finally, Zaynab, her aunt, found her sleeping at the feet of Husayn's headless body, in the middle of the night, after Ashura.

Does this story not make every loving father of a little girl go pick her up and hug her?

Is there any aspect of our life which is not represented at Karbala? The devotion of a father, a husband and a brother, the love of a sister, a daughter and a son, the determination of a martyr, the valor of a soldier, the anger of a rebel, the gallantry and chivalry of a real sayyed, the loneliness, the frustration and helplessness of a stranger, the pathos of an oppressed (*mazlum*), the hopefulness and optimism of a revolutionary, is there anything missing from this package? Nowhere else do we find so much and so deep to heal the wounds of humanity in a story so short and so brief.

It is for these reasons that Karbala is so important not only for the whole Muslim world today, but also for the entire human race in our times, even more so than it was at any other time

in the past.



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