

In the Name of God

Why *Ashura* Matters?

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“Husayn is from me and I am from Husayn. Allah befriends those who befriend Husayn and Husayn is the descendent (*sibt*) among other descendents (*asbat*).”

- The Prophet Muhammad (s) in *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*

Narrations of this kind reveal the singular position that Imam Husayn holds in our history and underscores why the events of *Ashura* are so important and should be commemorated. Beyond these *hadiths*, however, it is natural for each individual to ask why we pay tribute to the 10th of Muharram nearly 1400 years after the events of *Ashura* unfolded and to ask why and how those events apply to our current everyday lives. The following are some responses to these questions:

1. In answering these questions, one should keep in mind that to understand humanity, we must know our history. All over the world, nations spend an immense amount of time and resources to unearthing history, whether prehistoric or modern, to achieve the benefits of knowing about history and to answer the questions, “*Who am I?*” and “*Who are we?*” Indeed, we understand our personal or communal identity partly through addressing our history. Like others, we Muslims are not separated from our history -- nor would it be useful or even possible to do so.

In learning about the history of *Ashura* and *Karbala*, we learn who Imam Husayn (a.s.) is, what movement he inspired, and this enables us to have a better understanding of what Islam is about. The reason for this is that the events of *Ashura* were entirely connected to the social, cultural, and political developments that arose with the birth of Islam. For this reason, *Ashura* is a significant part of Islamic history and Muslims should not ignore it. That some countries do ignore the events of *Ashura* is an act of negligent censorship. Furthermore, *Ashura* became the root of a number of important political and social developments later on, which can be seen in Shi'a communities. This influence can still be felt by a large number of Muslims on important issues such as life, death, social responsibility, sacrifice, benevolence, and good governance.

2. One reason we pay particular attention to the events of *Karbala* is that the conflict surrounded Imam Husayn (a.s.), a person so great that the holy Qu'ran refers to him as the figurative son of Prophet Muhammad (s) (*Ayeh Mobaheleh*; Chapter 3:61). According to *Ayah Mawadda* (Chapter 42:23) his friendship and companionship is

considered as the reward of the Prophet (s). There is even a consensus between Islamic scholars that the Prophet Muhammad (s) called Imam Husayn (a.s) the leader of the youth in paradise. In doing so, the Prophet Muhammad (s) introduces Imam Husayn (a.s.) as a role model for those who seek to follow the right path to Paradise. Thus, in studying Imam Husayn's (a.s.) noble character, the Prophet (s) is calling upon us to emulate Islam's great role models.

3. Imam Husayn's (a.s.) fame and eminence based on the events of *Ashura*, sometimes overshadow other examples of his noble character traits from which many a lesson can be learned. Several brief examples include: Imam Husayn's wisdom and patience in face of the injustice surrounding his inheritance from the Prophet (s); his bravery and persistence in assisting his father Imam Ali (a.s.); his commitment to the peace agreement made by his brother Imam Hasan (a.s.) with Umayyad monarchy; his generosity toward the poor and the enslaved; and his lovely and deep spiritual relationship with God partly manifested in *Du'a Arafah*. Thus, *Ashura* is an event that provides us with an opportunity to know all aspects of Imam Husayn's (a.s.) personality.
4. The vast amount of time that separates us from Imam Husayn (a.s.) should not discourage us from learning his timeless morals and exemplary ethics. In discovering the essence of his teachings, we can learn how to behave like him in our own modern contexts. Such is the case regarding Islam's other role models, above all, the Prophet Muhammad (s), who is the role model of all Muslims (Qu'ran 33:21). Moral historical characters possess a timeless ability to be our role models. These ethical teachers promote fundamental moral values that transcend time and space. The issues Imam Husayn (a.s.) stood against, such as dictatorship, injustice, economic corruption and the lack of civil liberties, are very much the problems of the modern world. Even Mahatma Gandhi, the well-known Indian political and spiritual leader, stated who he emulated in liberating his nation: "I learned from Hussein how to achieve victory while being oppressed."
5. It is undeniable that the high point of Imam Husayn's (a.s.) influence occurred during the event of *Ashura*. Imam Husayn's (a.s.) integrity and principles prevented him from a forced alliance with a corrupt dictator unsuitable to lead the Muslims, and he was willing to give up his life to prove his opposition to tyranny. Imam Husayn's example underscores the importance in Islam given to the independence and free will of the people and the vital impact that it will make in the destiny of a given society. The essence of Imam Husayn's (a.s.) teachings is to fight against a forced government and those who deny human dignity and human rights. Imam Husayn's enduring lessons teach Muslims that they are responsible to stand against dictatorships brought about in the name of religion and to stand against those who

weaken the people's ability to decide about their own social and political affairs. Imam Husayn's (a.s.) stance against the tyranny of an imposed government punctuates the importance of a right to a dignified life, respecting inalienable civil and human rights.

6. One key question for those who struggle to promote Islamic values is that: what would be the framework of defending and preserving these Islamic values? There is a price for every fight and there should be a balance between costs and benefits. People always evaluate the value of these battles by looking at how much effort they are putting in and what they are getting out of it. The heavy price that Imam Husayn (a.s.) paid in his struggle with Yazid's oppressive government gives significance to this question: how far should a human being put himself, his relatives, and his companions through hardship and deprivation to defend the jewels of freedom, human dignity, and to defend the Prophet Muhammad's (S) universal message of justice. These lessons transcend not only time and space, but are consonant with anyone loyal to these moral principles, regardless of their view on Islam or religion in general.
7. Another applicable consideration relates to the concepts of "sacrifice" and "benevolence" as values in Islamic thought. Since the assumption is that all human being, including those who sacrifice and are benevolent, are equal in dignity and respect, the question becomes whether it is morally justified to give priority to others based on their status as someone who sacrifices or is benevolent. Imam Hossein's (a.s) teachings can shed guidance to the question of how much priority one should or can place for another.
8. Another lesson to learn relates to the various attempts of Imam Husayn (a.s.) to divert the tragedy of *Ashura* from happening. Such attempts have not been given their due attention. On a number of occasions, Imam Husayn (a.s.) suggested many ways not to accept the undignified alliance of Yazid's government and yet save the lives of his family, companions, and self. These examples show Imam Husayn's (a.s.) dedication and seriousness in diverting the tragedy of *Ashura*. Here, we are presented with the important Islamic principal of perusing social reforms through peaceful means and the avoidance of violence in social reform. At the same time, however, there are some values that cannot be compromised or taken lightly. From this point of view, Imam Husayn (a.s.) is a good role model for peace seekers and peace lovers. Thus, in reviewing the number of attempts to divert violence, we are presented with Imam Husayn's campaign against the propagation of violence that is the by-product of some social movements.
9. Commemoration of the grant events of *Ashura* must be comprehensive and equal to

its breadth and beauty. It must be studied by a correct understanding and fair analysis of the event and its rational goals. The cognitive and emotional aspects of the event must be considered together. Unfortunately, the emotional aspects in commemorating *Ashura* sometimes become so strong that the realistic, humane and rational aesthetic aspects of the event are pushed to the margins. Sometimes, the superstition and myths about *Ashura* are promoted to such an extent that they are given center stage. This, in turn, diminishes the true significance of Imam Husayn's (a.s.) uprising. On the other hand, the rationale defense of *Ashura* should not over-shadow the true feelings and pure emotions of Muslims who love Ahlul Bayt. It is assumed that expressions like showing sadness, lamenting, or shedding tears stem from grief at the inhumane treatment of Imam Husayn (a.s.), his family, and his companions. It is a sign of repudiation and revulsion toward such inhumane treatment, that causes Muslims to distinguish Imam Husayn (a.s.) by memorializing his story for centuries. The shedding of tears for what happened in *Karbala* shows the humane affections of Muslims towards the household of the Prophet (s). We are made mindful by the Qu'ran and the Prophet's (s) teachings that love and affection toward the household of the Prophet (s) is part of the fundamentals of Islam.

10. The humanitarian nature of Imam Husayn's movement is such that division of any sort in the Muslim community is antithetical to the very principles promoted in his movement. In commemorating the events of *Ashura*, one must continuously strive to embrace a spirit of brotherhood between Muslims. For this reason, the humanitarian and universal aspects of this social, political, and spiritual movement must be expressed, while the symbols that promote division and discord must be avoided. Nevertheless, the injustice and oppression Imam Husayn (a.s.) struggled against must not be ignored in the name of propagating unity. Thus, the essence of Imam Husayn's uprising: the spirit of standing against oppression must be preserved and the oppressions of the tyrannical Omayyad's monarchy, must be revealed.
11. In commemorating the events of *Ashura*, we are reminded that our intentions should be to remember and strive for the goals that Imam Husayn (a.s.) and his pure-hearted companions fought for. The events we now partake in must educate us about the humanitarian values of justice, human dignity, and social responsibility, so that this enormous movement brings us one step closer to Imam Husayn's goal. The grief and sorrow for the injustice surrounding *Ashura* should not cover and hide its goals. Imam Husayn (a.s.) did not sacrifice himself to be a redeemer for Muslims. He showed us the way to struggle for a dignified and spiritual life in the context of just social governance. Therefore, the onus is on us to preserve Imam Husayn's (a.s.) legacy, just as he defended and preserved the Prophet's (s) legacy.
12. Finally, we also commemorate *Ashura* to inform all Muslims of various sects and

backgrounds, believers from other Abrahamic faiths, and others about the values of justice and righteousness modeled by the Imam. As we study the various aspects of Imam Husayn's (a.s.) character and his movement, we are provided with another opportunity to reinvigorate our commitment to embracing the divine teachings of God.