The Tragedy of Karbala and Its Implications for the Self

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One of the primary objectives of commemorating the tragedy of Karbala and mourning the martyrs and victims has been to educate and inspire movements of self-reform and societal reform. This is noted in many works.

For example, according to Shaykh Muhammed Mehdi Shams al-Din in his work The Rising of Al-Husayn: Its Impact on the Consciousness of Muslim Society, the Imams (peace be upon him) promoted visitation (ziyara) and lamentation of the tragedy of Karbala for the purpose of putting man into "living and direct contact with the sources of Islam in thought and ideology, in application and practice," and further, that when a Shia undertakes these tasks, he or she makes a commitment to "remain faithful to their [AhlulBayt's (as)] covenant, their faith and their practice." It is not enough for the Shia to honor, venerate, and mourn and neglect the educational and reformational objectives of Muharram commemoration.

In light of this, we have generally achieved high awareness and consistent education within our communities and selves about the pure, upright aims of Imam Hussain and those with him, juxtaposed against the horrific cruelty and debauchery of the Umayyad regime. The message to reform ourselves and our communities to be aligned against the likes of Yazid is heard loud and clear so that this message is even somewhat in the consciousness of the larger world population aside from the Shias.

Further, we see efforts increasing to make that consciousness spread as our communities expand into traditionally non-Muslim lands. And this is not an unnecessary task. The danger of falling into the path of utter misguidance or even obstinate opposition to the path put forward by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny) at the command of Allah is an ever-present threat and reality.

However, in the interest of reform, this is not sufficient. If we look at the tragedy of Karbala, there were not just two sides of the event, but more.

It was not merely the likes of Yazid versus the likes of Imam Husain and his camp. There is another body of people I feel we should think about very deeply, for their actions and their fates carry potentially urgent and directly applicable lessons for us if we are to improve ourselves. There were many people who claimed to be the lovers of AhlulBayt and the followers of their Imam, with their allegiance to him fully. But after the tragedy took place, they were left with a great burden of their own action or inaction.

Consider the Kufans who invited Imam Husain and were eager for him and claimed to be ready to support him, follow him, and have him as their guide and leader. In truth, many of them were not prepared for their Imam, and when threatened they responded in a way to seek their safety, essentially abandoning their invited leader and his close followers to the tragedy. Many of these lived the rest of their lives in intense regret.

One example is the poet 'Ubayd Allah ibn al-Hurr al-Ju'fi. He was a leader in Kufa who had refused to help Imam Hussain. When the tragedy occurred, he realized the gravity of his mistake, but then it was too late. He spent the rest of his life trying to recover from his error; he proclaimed rebellion against the Umayyads, he went to Karbala and mourned the victims, and he wrote poetry blaming himself for his failure to support Hussain, and he struggled with life-long regret for his failure.

Another example is 'Awf ibn 'Abd Allah ibn al-Ahmar al-Azdi, who revolted against the Umayyads under the leadership of Sulayman ibn Surad al-Khuiza'i. His surviving writings are said to indicate he reviled himself and others like him who sent for Husain with false promises but were not with him at the battle to defend him. He spent the rest of his life wishing he had been there, and all his actions after tried to make amends for his not being there with his Imam.

These are just two examples of a large number of people. The lessons we must take from the tragedy of Karbala should include careful reflection about these people, what led them to make the decisions they made before Karbala, and how they struggled with it after. For, if the danger of Yazid-like traits existing in ourselves and our communities is real, then the danger of being like this regretful number is less a danger than a common unfortunate reality. In the modern era, instead of calling for Imam Hussain, we are calling for his pure descendant, Imam Mahdi (may Allah hasten his reappearance).

But to await for him properly, we have to reform ourselves not just to the extent of removing all Yazid-like traits, but to go further, God willing, and achieve a state as individuals and as a community that were we to be the modern counterparts of the Kufans and other Shia in the time of Imam Hussain, that we would behave and make decisions in such a way that we would not end up being regretful for not doing more to stand with our Imam.

Were our Imam to return today, once again we would be likely to see not a pure juxtaposition of good versus evil, but also a number of people who claim to love the Imam and to be ready to serve him, but when put to the test they may fail to stand on either side, preferring to wait things out and to let others sacrifice. If we do not want ourselves counted among their number, then we should take steps now to learn from the Kufans in the events surrounding the

martyrdom of Imam Hussain (peace be upon him).

True progress and reform requires not only desire and hope, but commitment and sacrifice. If we want to move forward we have to make deliberate and continual steps, starting from the very basics of our deen, and couple this with regular, intense self-examination and passion for the goal. Reform is an exercise in which you get out what you put in.

If we expend little of ourselves and reflect little, then we can expect little in return. We should not be content with that outcome. We should not be satisfied to say we are not like Yazid, but we should continue to push ourselves so that, God willing, we will never face the heart-breaking remorse and regret like 'Ubayd Allah ibn al-Hurr al-Ju'fi.