

Ali Akbar, the Hashmite Prince

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The whole town of Medina was humming with activity. People from all parts of the town were looking into the street of the Hashimites where a caravan was getting ready for a journey. The elders of the town were talking to each other in hushed tones, recalling the words of the Prophet, that a day will dawn when his beloved grandson Husain (as) would leave Medina with his sons, brothers, nephews and kinsmen never to return. There was sadness on the faces of all, young and old. The elderly people were aghast at the thought of Husain going away for ever. They were accustomed to turning to him in all their needs. The youths of Medina were saddened by the thought of Abbas and Ali Akbar and Qasim going away for good. Their anxious inquiries could only elicit this much information, that Husain with his kinsmen and children, was going for Hajj and from there to an unknown destination.

Thoughts of parting were tormenting not only the male population of Medina but also the womenfolk of the town. They too were accustomed to the munificence of the ladies of the Prophet's house. Who was there amongst them who had not received help and counsel from the daughters of Fatima? Who would be left now to whom they could turn in their hour of need, when Zainab and Kulsum, Umme Rubab and Umme Laila had left Medina? Had not times out of number their children received gifts and favours from Sakina and Rokayya?

As was their want, the people of Medina, men and women, young and old, had gone to the tomb of the Prophet to pray and seek solace to pray to God with the invocations of His Prophet that they might be spared the ordeal of separation from Husain and his family. There at the tomb of the Prophet they witnessed a heart-rending scene. They saw Husain and Zain prostrate with grief and sorrow, bidding farewell to the Prophet. They saw both of them visiting the grave of Fatima and lamenting over the separation, as if they were parting for ever.

It was rumoured that Husain was leaving Medina to arrange the marriage of his son Ali Akbar with some Princess, some lady of a noble stocks in some distant land. Could this rumour be correct? They all knew that there was not a young lad of marriageable age in Arabia who could be said to be fit to hold a candle before him. His handsome looks were matched by his handsome deeds. His nobility of character, his sense of duty, his generosity, his chivalry, his geniality, his love of justice and fairplay had endeared him to every soul. It was a well-known fact amongst the Arabs throughout Hejaz that Ali Akbar was bearing a remarkable resemblance to the Holy Prophet. In looks, in voice, in mannerism, in gait and in every way, he

resembled the Prophet. The resemblance was so marked that people from far and wide were coming to see him, to be reminded of the Prophet whom they were missing so much. Those who had not had the good fortune to see the Prophet were told by their elders that Ali Akbar was the very image of Muhammad, may Peace of Allah be on Him. There could, therefore, be no room for doubt that the noblest families of Arabia would consider it a signal honour if this scion of the Prophet's family were to ask for their daughter in marriage. But then, if Husain and his family were leaving Medina for Ali Akbar's marriage, they would not be secretive about it. The Prophet's grandson would in that case have given out the good tidings to the public. There was not a living being in that town whose heart would not have been filled with joy to hear about the betrothal of Ali Akbar. And if marriage of Ali Akbar was the purpose, surely Husain would not choose this season when outside the oasis of Medina, the scorching heat of summer was baking the desert sands!

After long discussions, by a consensus of opinion, it was decided to approach Husain in a delegation and to dissuade him from undertaking the journey. Some of the venerable companions of the Prophet undertook to apprise Husain of their forebodings and their recollection of his grandfather's prophecy that, if Husain migrated from Medina with his family, he would not return.

The caravan was almost ready to depart. The horses were neighing with impatience and champing their bits in the oppressive heat of the day. Husain was standing near his horse intently watching the arrangements being made by Abbas and Ali Akbar. He was reflectively following their movements as they were helping each lady and each child to mount the camels, as they were lending a helping hand to the ladies with tender care and affection; as the ladies were graciously and profusely thanking them for the excellent arrangements they had made for their comfort and for protecting them from the unbearable heat by holding their own gowns over their heads as a canopy. This sight had some inexplicable effect on Husain, for his eyes were glittering with tears. The solicitude displayed by his brother and son for the ladies and children should have filled him with happiness; but instead, the effect on him was just the opposite. Was he beholding the shadows of some coming events?

At this moment came the representatives of the people of Medina. With one voice they entreated Husain to abandon the idea of undertaking this journey. Their leader, with supplication in his faltering voice, besought Husain to tell them why he had decided to leave them and the Prophet's tomb for which he had so much attachment.

O Son of the Prophet, if we have displeased you in any way, please forgive us. At this display of love and affection Husain was moved to tears. Suppressing his grief he

replied:

My dear brethren, believe me that my heart is bleeding at this parting, parting from you and from the graves of my beloved grandfather, my dearest mother and my brother, whom I held dearer than my life. Had it not been for the call of duty, I assure you I would have abandoned the idea of leaving Medina. It grieves me most that I cannot for once grant you your wishes when you all love me so dearly. But Almighty Allah has so willed it and in His divine dispensation ordained that I should undertake this journey. I know what hardships await me;

but the Prophet has groomed me from my childhood to face them.

Seeing that the hand of destiny was snatching away Husain from them, they conferred amongst themselves and suggested that, if his decision to go from Medina was final, he should take with him all the able-bodied persons of the town so that they could protect him and his people. They reminded him of the treachery that was pervading the atmosphere in the adjoining regions. Husain, obviously moved by their sincere consideration for his safety, thanked them profusely. But he told them that, in accordance with the wishes of the Prophet, he had to fulfill the mission of his life only with those who were destined to be associated with

him in the task confronting him.

When they received this reply to their entreaties, from Husain, the representative of the

Medinites requested Husain to grant them one wish to leave Ali Akbar behind him in Medina. O Husain," they said, "we cannot bear the thought of parting with your son Ali Akbar, He is the very image of the Prophet. Whenever we feel overcome by the remembrance of Muhammad, we go to Ali Akbar to have a look at him and take comfort. We shall look after him better than we look after our own sons. We promise that we shall treat his every wish as a command. In fair weather and foul we shall stand by him. Even if we die, we shall command our children as our dying wish to attend to all his comforts and needs. His exemplary life has been an object

lesson for our sons who are devoted to him as if he were their brother.

These pleading, which had a ring of sincerity and earnestness, rendered Husain quite speechless for a time. How could he tell them what was in store for Ali Akbar who they loved and adored so much? When his sad reflections had subsided, he replied to them in a tone

tinged with pathos,

Alas, I only wish I could entrust my Ali Akbar to your care! In my mission he has to play a role, the importance of which time alone will tell. I cannot accede to your request for reasons which I cannot reveal to you; but rest assured that I shall always remember your kindness to me. I

shall carry with me vivid memories of this parting and remember you in my prayers.

When the heavens were glowing with the last rays of day, the caravan left on its long-drawn

journey to the unknown destination. Soon darkness descended upon Medina as if symbolic of the darkness and gloom which the departure of Husain had cast on the town, associated with a myriad memories of his childhood.

Meandering through the desert, the caravan had reached its destination, a destination which Allah had willed for it. The march of Husain and his kinsmen in this world had ended; but it was just the beginning of their march toward their real goal. With the dawn of the 10th day of the month of Muharram the events, for which the Prophet and Ali and Fatima had prepared Husain, started unfolding themselves. What a day it was and what fateful events it encompassed!

One by one the faithful followers went out to fight for the cause of Islam which forces of evil were attempting to stifle, and in the process faced death. In their glorious deaths they demonstrated what steadfastness and unflinching faith, what courage of conviction can achieve and attain against all odds. With his devoted supporters now sleeping the sweet slumber of death from which nothing could awaken them, the turn of Husain's sons and brothers and nephews came. In spite of Husain's best efforts to send his son Ali Akbar to the battlefield before all his devoted friends and faithful followers, they would not even let him mention it. The thought of Ali Akbar, Husain's beloved son, laying down his life in battle, when they were still alive, was too much for them. It would be blasphemous for them even to entertain such an idea!

Ali Akbar went over to his father to ask his permission to go out into that gory arena from which no person from his camp had returned. Husain looked at his face; it would be more correct to say that for a couple of minutes his stare was fixed on that face which he loved so much; which reminded him every time of his grandfather whom he resembled every inch. He tried to say something but his voice failed him. With considerable effort he whispered with downcast eyes:

Akbar, I wish you had become a father; then you would have known what I am experiencing at this moment. My son, how can a father ask his son to go, when he knows that the parting would be for ever! But Akbar, the call of duty makes me helpless in this matter. Go to your mother, and to your aunt Zainab who has brought you up from childhood and loved you and cared for you more than for her own sons, and seek their permission.

Ali Akbar entered the tent of his aunt Zainab. He found her and his mother Umme Laila gazing vacantly towards the battlefield and listening intently to the battle-cries of the enemy hordes. Their instinct made them aware that, now that all the devoted followers of Husain had laid down their dear lives defending him and them, the turn of his sons, and brothers and nephews had come. It was now only a question of time. It was only a question who would go first from

amongst them.

The light footsteps of Ali Akbar roused both of them from their reverie. Both of them fixed their gaze on him without uttering a word. Zainab broke the silence with an exclamation: Oh God, can it be true that Akbar has come to bid me and his mother the last farewell Akbar do not say that you are ready for the last journey. So long as my sons Aun and Muhammad are there, it is impossible for me to let you go.

Akbar knew what love and affection his aunt Zainab had for him. He was conscious of the pangs of sorrow she was experiencing at that moment. Her affection for him transcended everything except her love for Husain. He looked at her face, and at his mother's who was rendered speechless by her surging feelings of anguish. He knew not how to tell them that he had prepared himself for the journey to Heaven that lay ahead. He summoned to his aid his most coaxing manners that had always made his mother and Zainab accede to his requests and said:

My aunt, for all my father's kinsmen the inevitable hour has come. I implore you, by the love you bear for your brother, to let me go so that it may not be said that he spared me till all his brothers and nephews were killed. Abbas, my uncle, is Commander of our army. The others are all younger than me. When death is a certainty, let me die first so that I can quench my thirst at the heavenly spring of Kausar at the hands of my grandfather.

The earnestness of Akbar's tone convinced Zainab and his mother that he was determined to go. It seemed to be his last wish to lay down his life before all his kinsmen. Since on no other occasion they had denied him his wishes, it seemed so difficult to say no to his last desire.

With a gasp Zainab could only say,

Akbar, my child, if the call of death has come to you, go.

His mother could only say:

May God be with you, my son. With you I am losing all I had and cared for in this world. Your father has told me what destiny has in store for me. After you, for me pleasure and pain will have no difference.

With these words she fell unconscious in Ali Akbar's arms.

The battle-cry from the enemy's ranks was becoming louder and louder. Ali Akbar knew that he had to go out quickly lest the enemy, seeing that their challenges for combat were remaining unanswered, got emboldened to make a concerted attack on his father's camp. Even such a thought was unbearable for him. So long as he was alive, how could he permit the onslaught of Yazid's forces on his camp where helpless women and defenseless children were lying huddled together? He gently put his mother in his aunt Zainab's arms saying:

Zainab, my aunt, I am leaving my mother to your care. I know, from your childhood, your mother Bibi Fatima has prepared you for the soul-stirring events of today and what is to come hereafter. My mother will not be able to bear the blows and calamities that are to befall her, unless you lend her your courage. I implore you by the infinite love you bear for me to show the fortitude that you are capable of, so that your patience may sustain my mother when she sees my dead body brought into the camp's morgue. I entrust her to your care because there will be none to solace her and look after her in the years of dismay and despondency that lie ahead of her.

Ali Akbar embraced his loving aunt Zainab with tender love and affection for the last time. she exclaimed:

Akbar, go. My child, I entrust you to God, To ease your last moments I promise you that, so long as I live, I shall after Umme Laila with the affection of a mother.

With a heavy heart Ali Akbar returned to his father. There was no need for him to say that he had bid farewell to his mother and aunt Zainab, for the sorrow depicted on his face spoke volumes to Husain. Silently he rose and put the Prophet's turban on Akbar's head, tied the scabbard on his waist and imprinted a kiss on his forehead. In a failing, faltering voice he muttered:

Go Akbar, God is there to help you.

Treading heavily Akbar came out of the tent with Husain following closely behind him. He was about to mount his horse when he felt somebody tugging at his robe. He could hardly see, because his eyes were almost blinded with tears. He heard the voice of his young aster Sakina supplicating him not to leave her.

O my brother," she was saying, "do no go to the battleground from which nobody has returned alive since this mornings."

Softly Akbar lifted her, gently and affectionately kissed her on her face and put her down. His grief was too deep for words. Husain understood the depth of Akbar's feelings and picked up Sakina to console her.

The scene of Ali Akbar's march towards the battlefield was such as would defy description. The cries of ladies and children of Husain's camp were rising above the din of battle-cries and beating of enemy drums. It was appearing as if a dead body of an only son, dead in the prime of youth, was being taken out of a house for the last rites.

Ali Akbar was now facing the enemy hordes. He was addressing the forces of Amr Ibne Saad with an eloquence which he had inherited from his Grandfather and the Prophet. He was telling them that Husain, his father, had done them no harm and had devoted his life to the cause of

Islam. He was explaining to them that by shedding the blood of Husain and his kinsmen. They would be incurring the wrath of God and displeasure of the Prophet who had loved Husain more than any other person. He was exhorting them not to smear their hands with the blood of a person so holy, so God-fearing and so righteous. His words cast a spell on the army of the opponents. The older ones from amongst them were blinking their eyes in amazement and wondering whether the Prophet had descended from the Heavens to warn them against the shedding of Husain's blood. What a resemblance there was with the Prophet, in face, features and even mannerism! Even the voice was of Muhammad! But on second thoughts, they realized that this was Ali Akbar, the 18 year old son of Husain, about whose close resemblance with the Prophet people were talking so much.

Seeing the effect which Ali Akbar's address had produced on his soldiers, Amr Saad exhorted them to challenge him to single combat. A few of them, coveting the honour and rewards they would get if they overpowered and killed this brave son of Husain, emaciated by three days of hunger and thirst, came forward to challenge him. One by one he met them in battle, gave them a taste of his skill and prowess in fighting and flung them from their horseback to meet the doom they so much deserved. Now it was his turn to challenge the warriors of Yazid to come forward. Seeing that in spite of his handicaps, he was capable of displaying valour and battle craft for which his grandfather Ali had acquired name and fame and which had struck terror into the hearts of enemies of Islam none dared to come forward.

Ali Akbar had received several gaping wounds in the course of his victorious single combats. He was fast losing blood and the effect of his thirst was getting accentuated with every second that was passing. He realized that the treacherous enemies would attack him en masse. He had left his mother in a dazed condition. An irresistible urge to see his dear ones for the last time seized him and he turned his horse towards his camp.

He found his father standing at the doorstep of the tent and his mother and aunt standing inside the tent. Husain had been watching the battles of this thirsty youth and the two ladies were watching his face: they knew that if any calamity befell Ali Akbar, Husain's expression would indicate it. Whilst watching Husain's face, they were both praying offering silent prayers: O Allah, Who brought back Ismail to Hajra; O Allah, Who granted the prayers of the mother Musa and restored her son to her; O Allah, Who reunited Yakoob with his son Yusuf in response to the aged father's supplications, grant us our one wish to see Ali Akbar for once.

Was it the effect of these prayers that brought back Ali Akbar to the camp? Ali Akbar was now facing his aged father and his loving mother and Zainab. With an exclamation of joy and relief they clung to him. Husain lovingly embraced his son saying:

Bravo, my son. The gallantry you have displayed today reminded me of the battles of my revered father, Ali. The only difference was that, during his fights, my father Ali had not to battle against hunger and thirst as you had to.

Ali Akbar with his head bent replied:
Father, thirst is killing me because my wounds have added to its effect. It is usual to ask for rewards from parents for celebrating victories in single combats and I would have asked for a cup of refreshing water from you. But alas! I know that you have not even a drop of water with which you can quench the thirst of the young children. Father, knowing this, I shall not embarrass you by asking for water. I have come only to see you and my dear ones for the last time.

Ali Akbar met each and every one of his family. The second parting was sad as the first one, perhaps sadder. Without being told, every one realised that this was the last time they were beholding Akbar. Fizza, the faithful maid of Fatima and Zainab, was as disconsolate with grief as Zainab and Umme Laila. Husain followed Ali Akbar out of the tent. As he rode away, Husain walked behind him with a brisk pace for some distance, as a man follows his sacrificial lamb in Mina. When Akbar disappeared from his sight, he turned heavenwards and, with his hands raised, he prayed:

O Allah, Thou art my Witness that on this day I have sent away for sacrifice one whom I loved and cherished most, to defend the cause of righteousness and truth.

He sat on the ground as if trying to listen expectantly to some call from the battlefield. It was not very long before he received a wailing call, a call from Ali Akbar, a call of anguish and pain:

Father, Akbar has fallen with a mortal wound in his chest. Father, come to me for I have not long to live. If you cannot reach me, I convey my last salutations to you and my dear ones. Though Husain was anticipating such a call, what a ghastly effect it had on him! He rose from the ground and fell; he rose again and fell again. With one hand on his heart he struggled to his feet. Torrential tears were flooding his eyes. He rushed in the direction from which the cry had come. It seemed as Husain's strength had ebbed away on hearing that fateful cry of his dearest son, for he was falling at every few steps. He was sobbing:

Akbar, give me another shout so that I can follow its direction. Akbar, my sight is gone with the shock I have received and there is nobody to guide me to where you lie.

Abbas came rushing to the aid of his master. Holding his hand he led him on to the place from where Akbar's dying cry had come.

Now Husain was stumbling his way onwards resting his hands on Abbas' shoulders. The

distance seemed interminable but at last Husain and Abbas reached the place where Akbar was lying in a pool of his own blood. Ah, that tragic sight! May no father have occasion to see his young son in such a condition. With one hand on his chest covering a deep wound from which blood was gushing out, with his face writhing with pain, Akbar was lying on the ground prostrate and unconscious. With the agony he was enduring on account of the wound and the thirst that he was offering, he was digging his feet into the sand. With a cry of anguish Husain
fell on the body of Akbar.

My son, tell me where you are hurt; tell me who has wounded you in the chest. Why don't you say something? My Akbar, I have come in response to your call. Say one word to me, Akbar. Seeing that Akbar was lying there without any response to his entreaties, Husain turned to
Abbas and said:

Abbas, why don't you tell Akbar to say something to me. My dutiful son, who used to get up on seeing me, is lying on the ground pressed by the hand of death. Husain once again flung himself on the body of Akbar. His breathing was now heavier, a gurgling sound was coming from his throat. It seemed that his young life was engaged in an uneven struggle with death. Husain put his head on Akbar's chest. He lifted it and put his own
cheeks against Akbar's and wailed

Akbar, for once open your eyes and smile, as you were always smiling to gladden my heart. Though Akbar did not open his eyes, a faint smile appeared on his lips as if he had listened to his father's request. With the sweet smile still playing on his lips, he heaved a gasp and with that his soul departed. The cheeks of the father were still touching the cheeks of the son, in
death as so many times in life.

On seeing his son, his beloved son, breathe his last in his own hands, Husain's condition became such as no words can describe. For quite some time he remained there weeping as only an aged father who has lost a son, in his prime of youth, in such tragic circumstances, can weep. Abbas sat there by his side shedding tears. What words of consolation could he offer when the tragedy was of such a magnitude? All words of solace and comfort would sound hollow and be in vain when a father, an aged father, gives vent to his pent up emotions. After a time, Abbas reverentially touched Husain on his shoulders and reminded him that, since he had rushed out of the camp, Zainab and the other ladies of his house were waiting for him, tormented by anxiety, demented by the thoughts of the tragedy that had befallen them. Only mention of this was enough for Husain. He knew that, as the head of the family, it was his duty to rally by the side of the grief-stricken mother, his grief-stricken sister Zainab, and the children
for whom this bereavement was the greatest calamity.

Husain slowly rose from the ground and tried to pick up the dead body of Akbar but he himself fell on the ground. Abbas, seeing this, bent over him and said: My master, Abbas is still alive by your side. How can I leave you carry the body of Akbar and remain a silent spectator. Let me carry his body to the camp. " No Abbas, replied Husain, let me do this as a last token of my love. To hold him by my heart, even in his death, gives me some comfort, the only comfort that is now left to me. Saying this, he made all the efforts that he was capable of and, assisted by Abbas, he lifted the body of Akbar. Clasp ing it close to his bosom, he started the long walk to his camp. How he reached is difficult to say. It would not be too much to imagine that his grandfather Muhammad, his father Ali, his brother Hasan and perhaps his mother Fatima had descended from heaven to help him in this task. Husain reached the camp and laid down Akbar's body on the ground. He called Umme Laila and Zainab and Kulsum, Sakina and Rokayya, Fizza and the other ladies of the house to see the face of Akbar for the last time. The loving mother came, the loving aunts came, the children came, and surrounded the body of Ali Akbar. They looked at Akbar's face and then at Husain's. They knew that their weeping would add to Husain's grief which was already brimful. Ali Akbar's mother went up to her husband, and with stifled sobs and bent head, she said to him: My master, I am proud of Akbar for dying such a noble death. He has laid down his life in the noblest cause and this thought will sustain me through the rest of my life. I implore you to pray for me, to pray for ail of us, that Almighty Allah may grant us patience and solace. Saying this she turned to the dead body of her son lying on the ground and put her face on his. Zainab and Kulsum, Sakina and Rokayya had all flung themselves on Akbar's body. The tears that were flowing from their eyes were sufficient to wash away the clotted blood from the wounds of Akbar. Husain sat for a few minutes near the dead body of his son; the son whom he had lost in such tragic circumstances; the son who had died craving for a drop of water to quench his thirst. He felt dazed with grief. He was awakened from his stupor by Qasim, the son of his brother, who had come to seek his permission to go to the battlefield. He rose from the ground, wiped the tears from his aged eyes and muttered .Verily from God we come, and unto Him is our return

Reference:

Tears and Tributes by Zakir Shaheed Associates, Hyderabad, India