

Dynamics of the Culture of Mourning

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The 2nd of Muharram is that fateful day, on which Imam Husain (AS) stepped on the soil of Karbala to change the destiny of this obscure strip of land in Iraq forever. Nay! He changed the destiny of Islam as well by injecting it with his lifeblood in order to ensure its immortality so that the genuine teachings of his grandfather will remain Imam Ali (A.S.) forever, without the least distortion, thanks to the permanent line he drew between truth and falsehood – courtesy of the life-inspiring culture of mourning he bequeathed for Imam Ali (A.S.) humanitarian principles and all Imam Ali (A.S.) humanitarian values. As a matter of fact, as I explained in yesterday's issue the culture of mourning for the Martyrs of Karbala was instituted by Prophet Muhammad (SAWA) himself, while foretelling the tragedy that would befall his younger grandson.

In other words, the meaning of the Prophet's famous saying: "Husainun minni wa ana min al-Husain" (Husain is from me and I am from Husain) becomes more clear when we come across the following narration pertaining to the life of Imam Ali (A.S.) in the Musnad of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, the founder of one of the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence: "Muhammad bin Ubayd has related to us from Sharhabil bin Madrak from Abdullah bin Nujayy from his father, who narrates that he was marching with (Imam) Imam Ali (A.S.) towards Siffin (for the battle with the rebel Mu'waiyah) and on reaching Ninevah, (Imam) Imam Ali (A.S.) cried in a loud voice: "O Aba Abdallah! Be patient. O Aba Abdallah! Be patient beside the River Euphrates."

"I asked him: For what? He said: "Once when I went to the Prophet I saw tears in his eyes and asked him: O Messenger of Allah who has made you upset? Why are your eyes moist with tears? He said: A while ago [the Archangel] Gabriel left. He has informed me that indeed Husain (AS) will be killed beside the River Euphrates. Then he [the Prophet] said: Do you like to smell part of his soil [where Imam Husain (AS) will be killed]. I said: Yes. He stretched his hand and taking a fistful of soil gave it to me. As a result, tears started rolling down uncontrollably from my eyes (as well)."

The sequence of tragic events in Karbala on the fateful day of Ashura is not the intention of this column, whose main focus is on the history, philosophy and impact of the mourning for Imam Husain (AS). Thus, it could be said that the first one to compose an elegy and publicly mourn the martyred Imam was his beloved sister, Hazrat Zainab (SA), who on seeing the

headless and blood-stained body of her brother on the battlefield, turned towards Medina, in the direction of the shrine of her grandfather, and lamented: "The angels of the sky shower blessings on you, but here is Husain lying in the wilderness robbed of his turban and cloak and with his limbs dismembered while your (grand)daughters are made captive. To God is the complain!"

(She also said): O' Muhammad (SAWA) this is Husain hose head severed from the back of his neck lies exposed to the easterly wind pouring sand upon him, killed by the sons of adulteresses. Ah, what grief you have suffered O Aba Abdallah."

It is said that even the enemy forces cried at her lamentation although the greed for the perishing pleasures of the mortal world, coupled with their lack of faith, had made them murder the grandson of their own Prophet.

Next we see, the faithful sister, although a captive, shaking the courts of the oppressors in Kufa and Damascus to the very foundations with her eloquent sermons that had electrifying impact on the audience.

Yazid was frightened and ordered the release of the noble household of the Prophet, upon which Hazrat Zainab (SA) held history's first formal mourning ceremony in Damascus. She called for a house to be set apart for the commemoration and when the ladies of Damascus came to offer their condolences to her, bedecked in all their finery, she turned them away, saying this was not the way to mourn the tragic martyrdom of Imam Husain (AS). They returned after changing into black attire and divesting themselves of all their ornaments.

This was the first-ever commemoration in history for the heartrending tragedy of Karbala. Hazrat Zainab (SA) thus laid the foundations of the Majales-e Aza or mourning gatherings for Imam Husain (AS), a practice the faithful have continued to observe throughout the world ever since in the months of Muharram and Safar, in order to infuse life into society by reviving memories of the tragic course of events and the heroic dimensions of the Epic of Ashura and .its aftermath