

Commemorating The Martyrdom Of The Infallibles

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**The Porch of Wisdom Cultural
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Commemorating The Martyrdom Of The Infallibles

Summary Question

Are we permitted to hold the arba^{ʿin} commemorative ceremony programs for the martyrdom of Imam ʿAli (ʿa) and the other Infallibles of the Ahl al-Bayt (ʿa)? During the life time of the Infallibles (ʿa), do we see an example of [them] having wide-spread commemorative ceremonies for the martyrdom [of their predecessors] in which they held [such programs] over the course of many days, weeks or held ‘ten day’ [ʿashra] events?

Detailed Question

Is there any problem with marking the arba^{ʿin} commemorative ceremony for the martyrdom of Imam ʿAli (ʿa) [such as is done with the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn (ʿa) in which we remember him forty days after his martyrdom]? Is such a commemoration [to mark forty days after the martyrdom date of Imam ʿAli (ʿa)] considered a religious innovation – bidʿah? Do we have ahadith which mention that it is impermissible to hold an arba^{ʿin} commemoration for any of the Imams other than Imam al-Husayn (ʿa)?

Summary Answer

As for what has been mentioned in the religious texts in regards to holding commemorative ceremonies – majalis – for the martyrdom of the [other] Imams (ʿa): In the sources of the narrations and ahadith of the Shiʿa, when it comes to establishing commemorative gatherings, such programs have a special

status only when it comes to expressing grief over Imam al-Husayn (‘a) – and that too, only in those specific days of the year [meaning the first ten days of the month of Muharram and the arba‘in period].

However, in regards to the other Imams (‘a), there are no ahadith or historical reports in which the martyrdom of any other of the Infallibles (‘a), or even the remembrance of other important sorrowful historical events which transpired, as ever being declared by the Imams (‘a) as being a day to remember or commemorate – let alone that we observe the arba‘in of any of the Imams (‘a) [other than Imam al-Husayn (‘a)], or that we mark ten-day commemorative majalis ceremonies for any of the Imams (‘a) other than Imam al-Husayn (‘a).

However, with that said, if a majlis to express grief over the tragic martyrdom of any of the other Imams (‘a) is held, then perhaps it can be done so under the guise of showing reverence to the signs (shā‘air) of Allah (SwT), by keeping in mind the following points:

1. These ceremonies (majalis) are not to be held in such an elaborate fashion such that the grief sessions (‘azadari) of Imam al-Husayn

(‘a) – which according to numerous traditions, has been emphatically stated need to be held – do not gradually take on an aura of being lesser in greatness, or end up being like other grief ceremonies (majalis);

2. In addition, such majalis for other than Imam al-Husayn (‘a) must not be structured in such a way that people begin to hold these new found ten-night gatherings (‘ashra) and arba‘in programs. As we previously stated, when we look at the ahadith, there is no mention or emphasis on holding such majalis for other than Imam al-Husayn (‘a).

If such programs begin to take root in the community, then it is possible that those who are ardent followers of the faith may feel that within the year, they must continuously wear black, be in a state of grief, and limit themselves as to what they can do in life [as normally, during the period of the remembrance of ‘Ashura, the faithful will distance themselves from many of the permissible pleasures of life]. With this, a misguided understanding may fall over the Shi‘a community that being “religious” means that one must leave all forms of happiness and joy in their life [as they must mourn and cry over the tragedies which befell the Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) for the entire year].

Detailed Answer

That which we can say in regards to setting up the commemorative gatherings (majalis) to mark the grief (‘aza) of the tragedies of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) is that:

Within the sources of ahadith and traditions of the Shi‘a, there is a special emphasis given to establishing majalis to lament the tragedy of Imam al-Husayn (‘a) – such that the Imams (‘a) which came after him would mark the first ten days of the month of Muharram in a state of sadness and grief.

They would sit in their homes and remember the tragedy of Imam al-Husayn ('a) and his companions.[2](#)

In addition, the poets would also recite prose in lamentation over Sayyid al-Shuhada (a) and his companions.[3](#)

However, in regards to holding majalis for the martyrdom of the other Imams ('a), we do not have any traditions or historical references which show us that during the time of the later Infallibles ('a), that when the day of the martyrdom of any previous Imam arrived that the Infallibles ('a) would pronounce that day as a general day of grief and lamentation – let alone marking the arba'in of that Imam ('a)!

In this vein, it has been clearly stated in the traditions that during the era of Imam al-Sadiq ('a), the Shi'a only marked the death anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn ('a) and they did not even observe the martyrdom anniversary of the Noble Prophet (S), the Commander of the Faithful ('a), Fatima al-Zahra (a), or Imam Hasan ('a).[4](#)

In any case, if the gatherings of ['aza](#) are organized for the other Imams ('a), then perhaps they can be done under the guise of being a way to show reverence of the signs of Allah (SwT) (shairullah).

However, the reality is that other than in regards to the ['aza](#) of Imam al-Husayn ('a), we do not have any specific traditions in which we are told to mark the martyrdom of anyone else, except that which is seen in regards to the last testament (wasiyyah) of Imam al-Baqir ('a) in relation to establishing a mourning ceremony (['aza](#)) for himself in the region of Mina, just outside of the city of Mecca – and that too only for a period of ten years.[5](#)

In this example, in regards to the commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam al-Baqir ('a), as the tradition mentions, this gathering to express grief (['aza](#)) was mentioned by Imam al-Baqir ('a) himself. He went on to say that it should be held for a limited period of time – ten years – and within a limited geographic location – the land of Mina – in which he wanted this act to be carried out. As such, we cannot take such a tradition and apply it to be a general directive [for all of the other Imams ('a)].

Coming back to the main theme of this article, generally speaking, that which we can state in this regard is: Perhaps the reason why there is an exclusive emphasis about holding majalis to specifically remember Imam al-Husayn ('a) [and not the other members of the Ahl al-Bayt ('a)] is due to the exceptional circumstances surrounding the movement of [Ashura](#) and the self-sacrifice and altruism displayed by Imam al-Husayn ('a) and his companions.

By the other Imams ('a) not holding majlis ['aza](#) for the other Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt ('a), even to the extent of not marking the death of the Prophet of Islam (S) and Sayyida al-Zahra (a), this may have been done to protect the greatness of the movement of [Ashura](#) and to ensure that these programs (majlis ['aza](#)) for the other members of the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) do not become habitual practices alongside the commemorative event of grief (['aza](#)) for the martyrs of Karbala.

Indeed, if it was to be that for the martyrdom of each of the Infallibles (‘a), with all of the varied dates of their martyrdoms which exist for them in history, and in addition, if it was to be that we were to hold mourning ceremonies for one week and commemoration events to mark the fortieth day (arba‘in) after each event of martyrdom [of the other Infallibles (‘a) who were martyred], and even for the martyrdom of [important religious personalities, such as the] non-Imams, and we were to hold majalis for every sad event which has transpired in our [Shi‘a] history such as the attack against the house of Imam ‘Ali (‘a) [which led to the martyrdom of his wife, Fatima al-Zahra (‘a) and the miscarriage of their son, Muhsin (‘a)], and everything else that has transpired in history, then simply by keeping in mind the number of such events which have taken place, we can deduce that the special commemorative sessions of ‘Ashura and the first ten days of Muharram would have very little meaning in [the Shi‘a] culture and society!?

If we were to hold such programs throughout the year, then would there be any days in the calendar year which would not be regarded as days of grief and mourning?

Of course, there are some people who by citing general ahadith which mention that the Shi‘a are in a state of grief and sorrow when their leaders are in a state of grief and sorrow⁶ – try to use such ahadith to justify their commemoration of all of the tragic historical events. However, for those who are the scholars of this faith, it is clear that such ahadith cannot be used to justify such a stance and the creation of special new times for mourning – again, with the exception of the [first] ten days of Muharram.

Of course, the Shi‘a have a special spiritual connection and inner affinity to their Infallible leaders (‘a), and even in the times of happiness and festivity, they remember the calamities that befell the Ahl al-Bayt (‘a).

Dawud ibn Kathir al-Raqi has said that once he was in the presence of Imam al-Sadiq (‘a). The Imam requested some water and after drinking it, he began to cry such that his eyes were filled with tears. The Imam (‘a) then said: “O Dawud! May Allah deprive the killers of al-Husayn (‘a) of His mercy! How much the remembrance of the killing of al-Husayn makes life bitter. I do not drink cold water except that I remember al-Husayn. There is not a single servant of Allah who drinks water and remembers al-Husayn, and asks Allah to send His damnation upon his killers except that by doing so, Allah will record 100,000 good actions for that individual; wipe away 100,000 sins off of his record; and raise his rank 100,000 levels. In addition, this person will be given a reward as if he freed 100,000 individuals from slavery, and on the Day of Judgement, he will be raised up with an illuminated face.”⁷

Similarly, when the Commander of the Faithful ‘Ali (‘a) was busy burying his oppressed wife, Fatima al-Zahra (‘a), he addressed the [grave of the] Prophet (S) and said:

As for my grief [at losing my wife], it will last forever...⁸

Imam ‘Ali (‘a), the humble follower of the Prophet (S), was also in a constant state of grief, however it does not mean that he commemorated the grief ceremony for his wife [what we commonly refer to today

as the Ayyam Fatimiyyah] for the entire year, or that he initiated certain limitations upon himself during his lifetime [due to losing his wife in such a tragic manner], or that he brought about innovations [bid'ah] in his life [by creating such commemorative programs].

In any case, without creating an innovation [bid'ah] in announcing [to the general public] the necessity of mourning at a certain time, it is desirable to remember the calamities which befell the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) at every possible opportunity, and to ensure that their tragedies are never lost into the annals of history, however we must note the following two points:

1. These commemorative sessions [other than those during Muharram] of showing grief for the other Infallibles ('a) must not be arranged and held like the programs which are held to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn ('a) – which in numerous ahadith have been specifically emphasized to be held – so that they, meaning the Muharram commemorations, do not take on a lesser sense of importance, and do not become like the other commemorative sessions held for the other Infallibles ('a).
2. Secondly, we must ensure that we do not organize such commemorative services such that they turn out to be ten-day commemorative sessions, or arba'in sessions for the other Infallibles ('a). When we look into the ahadith, we see absolutely no such indication or emphasis on holding such programs in this fashion such that if they were to be held in this way, then gradually, those who are the adherents to the faith of Shi'a Islam, during the course of the year would constantly be having to wear black and think of themselves as being in a constant state of grief, and thus having to place limits upon themselves about what they can and cannot do. Even more, this assumption would make its way around the society that to be religious means that you must stop being happy.

O Allah! Send Your prayers upon Muhammad and the family of Muhammad!

1. Arba'in literally means forty and in the context of the ahadith, it refers specifically to the commemoration marking forty days after the day of Ashura when Imam Husayn ibn Ali ('a) was tragically martyred in Karbala. This annual event, which began after the events of Ashura when the family of Imam al-Husayn ('a) left Sham and stopped in Karbala before returning to Medina has since become an annual pilgrimage attracting millions of lovers of freedom who walk from the Iraqi city of Najaf al-Ashraf to the city of Karbala. (Tr.)

2. Qummi, Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Ali ibn Babawayh al-, Al-Amali, pg. 128, Printed in Beirut by Al-A'jami, Fifth Edition, 1400 AH.

3. Baghdadadi, Abu al-Qasim Ja'far ibn Muhammad ibn Ja'far ibn Mus'ab, Kamil al-Ziyarat, Researched and Annotated by Abd al-Husayn al-Amini, pp. 104–106, Section Three, Printed in Najaf by Dar al-Murta'wiyya, First Print, 1397 AH.

4. Saduq, Shaykh al-, Illal al-Shara'i, vol. 1, pg. 225, Printed in Qum by Maktabat al-Dawari, n.d.

5. Kulayni, Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Ya'qub ibn Ishaq al-, Al-Kafi, vol. 5, pg. 117, Printed in Tehran by Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyyah, 1406 AH.

6. Saduq, Shaykh al-, Al-Khisal, vol. 2, pg. 634, Printed in Qum by Jami'a Mudarrisin, 1403 AH. One such example of a hadith has been narrated in Ghurar al-Hikam, tradition 5,060, in which it is mentioned:

قال الإمام عليّ (عليه السلام): إِنَّ اللَّهَ سُبْحَانَهُ أَطَّلَعَ إِلَى الْأَرْضِ، فَاخْتَارَ لَنَا شَيْعَةً يَنْصُرُونَنَا، وَيَفْرَحُونَ لِفَرَحِنَا، وَيَحْزَنُونَ لِحُزْنِنَا، وَيَبْذُلُونَ أَنْفُسَهُمْ وَأَمْوَالَهُمْ فِيْنَا أَوْلِيَّكَ مِنَّا وَإِلَيْنَا.

Imam Ali ('a) has said: “Verily Allah, the Glorified, checked the earth and chose for us followers who would help us, would be gladdened by our joy and saddened by our sadness, and would spend from their people and their possessions in our

way – these are the ones who are from us and shall rejoin us [in the Hereafter].”

[7.](#) Baghdadi, Abu ʿAbdillah Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Nuʿman al-Ukbari al-, Al-Amali, pg. 142.

[8.](#) Nahj al-Balagha, pg. 320, Printed in Qum by Dar al-Hijrah, n.d.

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[4] <https://www.al-islam.org/organization/islamic-publishing-house-iph>

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