

## Editor's Preface

To return to Karbala is to return to martyrdom and those who arose and bore witness, bore witness to their covenant with God, agreed to on that sacred day long ago – so long ago that it forms part of the collective unconscious – the day when God said, "Am I not thy Lord?" and we answered, "**Yea, we do bear witness.**" (**The Quran 7:172**). On that sacred day we committed ourselves as human beings responsible to God, passively responsible for the protection of the earth, for safe guarding all of God's creation and His creatures, actively responsible for the ridding of all of that which destroys God's creation and His creatures.

In this activated capacity, we have a solemn duty to fight oppression and injustice with whatever means are available to us. Some are able to fight with the sword, others with the Word but our beloved Imam Husayn ('a) found a third way. He fought for the Truth and what he believed in with his life – he offered martyrdom as the alternative and God accepted it.

On the plains of Karbala near the ancient city of Babylon in 680 A.D. Imam Husayn ('a) and his family and his companions were martyred by Yazid.

Imam Husayn ('a), the third Shiite Imam, son of Hazrat Ali and Fatima and thereby, grandson of the Prophet of Islam, is known as the king of martyrs, *shah-e shahidan* for it was he who sacrificed his life by bearing witness to Islam.

Imam Husayn ('a) was about 56 years old when the Umayyid Caliph, Mu'awiyah died. He had been Imam for ten years (since the murder of his brother, Imam Hasan ('a) who had been killed by Mu'awiyah.)

Imam Husayn ('a) lived under the most difficult outward conditions of suppression and persecution. Religious laws had lost most of their credit as Shariati tells us. The laws of the Umayyid government had gained complete control. Mu'awiyah made use of every possible means to obliterate the name of Ali and the family of the Prophet. He wanted to strengthen his son, Yazid's position. Thus Imam Husayn

('a) had to endure these difficulties from Mu'awiyah. When he died and his son Yazid assumed the Caliphate, Imam Husayn ('a) underwent even greater hardship.

He realized that he must leave Medina for Mecca as Yazid ordered the governor of Medina to force Imam Husayn ('a) to give his allegiance to him. To give allegiance in the Islamic tradition was vital for the continued existence of a government. Without the allegiance of the strongest existent forces, a government would not stay in power for long. To withhold one's allegiance was considered to be a crime and brought disgrace and dishonour. Following the example of the Prophet, people believed that allegiance, when given by free will and not through force, carried authority and weight.

Mu'awiyah had realized that putting pressure upon the Imam would only serve to push an acceptable situation to the breaking point. Yazid did not pay heed to the last will of his father which was not to force the allegiance of Imam Husayn ('a). Rather, he immediately began pushing for the oath of allegiance. Imam Husayn ('a) fled to Mecca and sought refuge within the Ka'ba. He remained in that city for four months and during that time he received letters and pledges from the entire Islamic world asking for his help in overthrowing the oppressive Ummayyid rule. In particular, he was invited by the people of Kufa to come and live among them and rule them.

So we find Imam Husayn ('a) not able to turn back to Medina for he would, by so doing, sanction a government of injustice and tyranny. He would be expressing public contempt of Islam. He could not betray Islam by such an act even though he knew it meant certain death for him. To go forward to Kufa also had its dangers for the people were not completely trustworthy.

He decided to go forward. Through this decision, he sealed his fate. The journey he undertook towards Kufa was a journey towards the place where his father, Hazrat Ali had been killed 20 years earlier.

He sent his cousin, Muslim ibn 'Aqil, to Kufa to see what the situation was like. Ibn Muslim was at first successful in receiving many pledges from the people of Kufa. He sent the pledges and good tidings of the people of Kufa to Imam Husayn ('a). Once Imam Husayn ('a) received the pledges and news from Ibn Muslim, he, his companions and his family began the journey towards Kufa.

Meanwhile, Yazid heard of the work of Ibn Muslim and was most disturbed. He sent orders to his son to put a stop to the activities of Imam Husayn ('a)'s emissary. Ibn Muslim was then murdered by Yazid's son, Ibn Zayd.

Only a few days journey from Kufa, Imam Husayn ('a) learned of the murder of Muslim and his sons. In spite of this news and other warnings which he had received, Imam Husayn ('a) refused to turn back and instead, continued moving towards Kufa. He heard that guards were located at all the city gates and that he would be prevented from entering the city. He continued moving forward marching towards his death.

Approximately seventy kilometres from Kufa, in a desert named Karbala, the Imam and his entourage

were surrounded by the army of Yazid. For eight days they stayed in this spot during which time the circle narrowed and the number of the enemy's army increased. Finally the Imam with his household and a small number of companions were encircled by an army of thirty thousand soldiers. The enemy cut them off from the Euphrates and they all suffered great thirst in the very hot desert of Karbala.

The Imam spoke to his companions, inviting them to leave him for to remain would mean certain death. He told them that the enemy only wanted his person and none of them were under obligation to stay. Traditionally 72 persons are said to have participated in the battle of Karbala.

On the tenth day of Muharram of the year 680 A.D., the Imam lined up before the enemy with his small band of followers, less than ninety persons consisting of forty of his companions, thirty some members of the army of the enemy that joined him during the night and day of war and his Hashimite family of children, brothers, nephews, nieces and cousins. That day they fought from morning until their final breath, and the Imam, the young Hashirmites and the companions were all martyred.

## **The Resonance of Karbala**

Karbala resonates in the life of the Iranian people and has done so for exactly 1300 years. The reverberations of this resonance can most clearly be seen in 'living art.'

The inspiration of martyrdom begins when the 'living artist' 'makes his or her intentions known' (*niyyat kardan*). This 'intention' inspires the heart and soul of that person to express something which is greater than the individual.

This inspiration cannot be measured. It affects 'living art' as well as the 'art of living', individual and social manifestations of religious inspiration.

The individual as living art, begins forming at birth and continually changes until the form is completed at death. Due to the varying factors which cause the changes in the form, the influence of a particular event is difficult to relate to the form. That is, there is an indirect influence of cultural and social factors which pressure the form much as the fingertips of a sculptor working with clay. In the end, the form is rounded and smoothed and the effect of the fingertips is concealed.

Ibn Arabi, the 12th century, A.D. Islamic metaphysician, described the interplay between the conscious and unconscious elements of an artisan to his work in the following way: 'Looking at an artisan (knower) who is engaged –in moulding things out of clay (that which is to be known), one might make a superficial observation that the clay in the hands of the artisan is sheer passivity, sheer non–action. One overlooks the important fact that, in reality, the clay for its own part positively determines the activity of the artisan. Surely the artisan can make a variety of things out of clay, but whatever one may do, one cannot go

beyond the narrow limits set by the very nature of the day. Otherwise expressed, the nature of the clay itself determines the possible forms in which it may be actualized.

The concept of martyrdom: to arise and bear witness has, in a sense, become so much a part of Shiite ideology that one can refer to it as a rite, a ritual, which activates the 'living artist' or individual to become 'Husayn ('a)-like' for 'being Husayn ('a)' as Ali Shariati presents him belongs to Husayn ('a) alone.

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