



Assalamu Alaykum

Dear Students,

I hope this letter reaches you with the best of health and Iman. Just sending a reflection. Longer than usual.

While most anything that the Divine wills is open for tremendous observation, analysis, and reflection, one choice always strikes me as profound. I'm speaking of the events of the 10th of Muharram, known commonly as Ashura. This day represents a fundamental split between Sunni and Shia. As mentioned before, I position myself as a Sunni, and serve all of you (as well as any and all non-Muslims on campus). In the context of this letter, however, that informs the language of prayer and respect I use for the people mentioned below.


A fundamental difference between the two groups stems from the sources of guidance. Beyond the Prophet -p- and the Quran, Sunnis look to the Sahaba (the companions of the Prophet -p-) with emphasis on specific Sahaba. Shias look to the Ahl al-Bayt ("the people of the house," aka the family of the Prophet -p-) with emphasis on specific members of the Ahl al-Bayt: the Imams, may Allah be pleased with them. From there, both schools look to their scholarly traditions that have developed over the centuries.

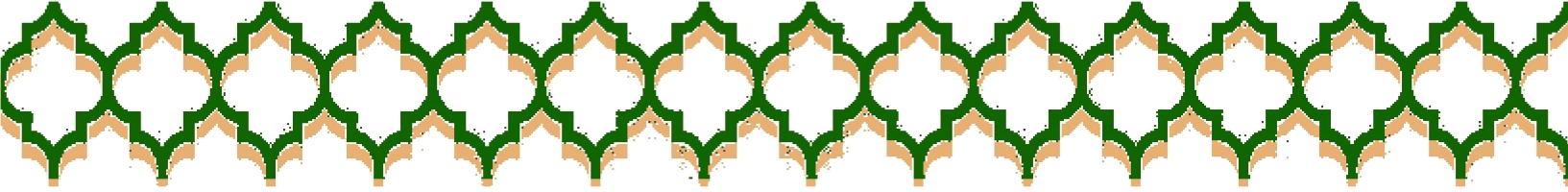
But, speaking of the Ahl al-Bayt, Sunnis and Shias give different attention to them, and also differ regarding who is and is not included among the Ahl al-Bayt. Still, it must be noted that both hold the Family of the Prophet -p- in the highest levels of love. Meaning, Law and Love integrate with each other differently in the two traditions, and we see that play out in the regards given to the Ahl al-Bayt.

Contemporary American Sunnis and Shias have mostly forgotten this point that Sunnis also hold the Ahl al-Bayt in the highest level of esteem. It is odd that Sunnis have forgotten this, considering that every prayer ends with blessings on the Prophet -p- and his family. Further, so many Sunnis are named either Hasan or Husayn, after the beloved grandsons of the Prophet, may peace be upon him. Among Sunnis in many parts of the Muslim world, there is heightened respect for Sayyids and Sharifs, being descendants of the Prophet, may peace be upon him.

This brings us to another difference between Sunni and Shia: what happens with Ashura. In practice, beyond any contemporary political differences, Ashura may or may not be an irreconcilable split between Sunni and Shia. Attempting to reconcile Shia and Sunni on Ashura would be akin to trying to reconcile Jews and Christians on Passover/Good Friday: it's the same period, with fundamentally different meanings and observances, for the Jews are celebrating the Exodus from Pharaoh, while Christians are commemorating the crucifixion of Jesus, may peace be upon him. If it was in Allah's will that the events that landed on Ashura would have happened on different days, the world might be a different place. But, His will governs the world, and His will is most profound.

In Makkah's pre-Muhammadi period, the Quraysh, leaders of Makkah (Mecca), used to fast on Ashura. The Prophet, may peace be upon him, is reported to have fasted on this day, also instructing the Muslims to do so. When the revelations in Madinah (Medina) gave instructions to fast for Ramadan, the fast of Ashura become optional.





In Madinah, the Prophet, may peace be upon him, is reported to have discovered that the Jews were fasting on Ashura. They told him that the fast was in commemoration of the Divine saving Prophet Musa (Moses, peace be upon him) and his people from the Pharaoh. That was the moment of the splitting of the sea, which most of you are familiar with. In contemporary Judaism, that commemoration is Pesach (Passover). And, the closest (as I am aware of) to that Madinan fast is the Fast of the Firstborn. I mention “contemporary Judaism” because most of our historical references to the Jews of Madinah are hard to find in mainstream contemporary Jewish sources.

You will recall that in the Islamic paradigm, the Prophets, from Adam through Muhammad, including Moses and Jesus are regarded as Prophets of Islam, may peace be upon them. Thus, the Prophet -p- instructed his followers that we have greater right on Moses. So, he instructed Muslims to fast on the day of Ashura and either the day before or the day after.


What I have shared above holds such prominence in Sunni tradition that it is often a celebrated day. But, then, there is another event.

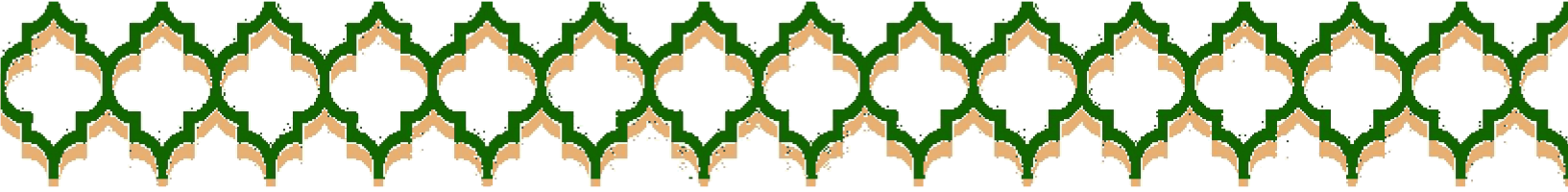
Some sixty years later, the once fledgling Muslim community is now a global empire. The Umayyad family runs the empire, under the son of Mu’awiyya b. Abi Sufyan, may Allah be pleased with them, Yazid. As part of a movement to return justice to the Muslim world, the beloved grandson of the Prophet -p- answers the call of people from Kufa, Iraq. As he heads to Kufa, Yazid’s forces encounter them in a nearby location, Karbala, Iraq. Yazid’s forces wipe out almost everyone in the camp, including the beloved grandson, Husayn, as well as Husayn’s child. Muslim populations across the globe regard the martyrdom of Husayn, may Allah be pleased with him as one of the great atrocities of Islamic history.

I am intentionally leaving out many details, as well as many depictions. For example, among Sunni theologians (rather than historians who are Sunni), Yazid receives various characterizations, from esteem, to inept, to mistaken, to malicious. Among Shias, however, Yazid was the Pharaoh of his generation, ordering the murder of the grandson of the Prophet, on the exact day of Ashura.

While Sunnis express Ashura as one of two days of fasting, Shias express much of Muharram itself in grief over the betrayal and abandonment of the grandson of the Prophet, may peace be upon him. That difference periodically inflames antipathy between members of each school, Sunni and Shia: Sunnis wonder why Shias are not listening to the instruction of the Prophet -p-, while Shias wonder why Sunnis disregard any concern for the grandson, may Allah be pleased with him. It gets far worse than that: Karbala itself has to go on heightened security because of recent terrorist attacks during the mourning processions.

In light of this week’s events, all of the above takes on a further relevance. With the Israeli closing of al-Masjid al-Aqsa, we find that double concern resurfacing: Sunni call for Divine intervention against tyranny (as embodied in the splitting of the sea) and Shia call for Social Justice against tyranny (as embodied in Husayn’s work and martyrdom, may Allah be pleased with him).





So, what is my advice to you, regarding Ashura, regarding Jerusalem? Practice your religion according to the dictates of your religion, and do not be disturbed the practices of others. You have what you earn; they have what they earn.

The vast majority Muslim population in the world, in the United States, in Chicago, and at Loyola is Sunni. It means that there will be “Sunni privilege.” Some will exercise it intentionally, but most who exercise it, do so unintentionally. Sunnis must understand this, but so must Shias; the exercise of privilege is a problem when it intrudes on the lives, practices, and sensitivities of those of lesser privilege, but it is not always done with malice. Sometimes, yes. Always? No. Likewise, the acknowledgment of a minority group’s lack of power is itself sometimes a “favor” from the privileged, thus reinforcing privilege more than erasing it.

Thus, my first advice is straightforward: practice your religion. On my campus, you are each safe with me and protected by me, Insha Allah. If your religion prescribes that you fast then fast. If your religion prescribes you to mourn, then mourn. If your religion prescribes you to fast, then understand that those who are mourning are doing what they understand their religion tells them to do. If your religion prescribes you to mourn, then understand that those who are fasting are doing what they understand their religion tells them to do. You will have what you have earned, and they will have what they have earned.

Regarding Israel, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, India, Somalia, etc... all the places where tyranny reigns, remember that you have obligations. But as far as Ashura is concerned, you start with God. Secondly, remember that your obligations to your neighbor take priority over other social justice obligations, even though they do not replace the others. Beyond America’s facade, there is plenty of hunger, trauma, and suffering.

Nevertheless, in all this, I find the Divine’s will so fascinating: everything traces back to that day of the splitting of the sea. Imam Husayn, may Allah be pleased with him, is killed on Ashura. On Ashura, the people of Musa, peace be upon him, were saved by the Pharaoh. Jews, however, celebrate that Exodus on Passover. For Christians, it is during the Passover festivities and sacrifices that Jesus, may peace be upon him, entered Jerusalem, leading to a short series of betrayals and judgments, resulting in his Crucifixion. A recurring theme in each of these narratives, is the suffering of the forces of good at the hands of the forces of evil. Thus, within the two Islams, the complete picture is to seek reliance on the Divine against human tyranny, and seek to stand up against human tyranny in service to the Divine. Thus, with that temporary closing of al-Aqsa, I’m reminded of a common Shia saying, invoking such memories in every struggle for justice, is “Every land is Karbala; every day is Ashura.”

Thus, my second advice: in your obedience to the Divine, dedicate your work toward justice.

And God knows best.

May Allah bless you.

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