

## Advice

The construction of every society, from the nuclear family to the global community, is an interdependent process. We rely upon each other's experience, expertise and insight in all our daily matters of education, health, law, business, family and religion. It is for this reason that Islam places the exchange of advice and encouragement of good actions as one of the primary auxiliaries of religion. Hence, Imam Muhammad al-Jawad (A) affirms, 'The believer is in need of divine opportunities from Allah, a self-reproaching soul and access to good advisors.'<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand and fulfil their responsibilities, members of the Muslim community came to Prophet Muhammad (S) both in public and private, seeking his counsel. Often, in response to a question, Allah would reveal a verse of the Holy Qur'an. This relationship between people, the Holy Prophet and Allah, is instructive to us in two ways. Firstly, it shows us that for any matter, our primary point of recourse in seeking guidance, should also be from the Holy Prophet, his Ahlul Bayt and the Holy Qur'an. The second is that, as God-centric people, we should be discerning and wise in selecting our sources of guidance and knowledge. There are many outlets, TV programmes, websites and people willing to offer advice, but not all of them provide God-centric counsel. This is why in the Holy Qur'an, Allah has clearly warned,

***'And amongst mankind there is he who disputes about Allah without knowledge. It is decreed that whoever takes him for a friend, shall be led astray and directed to the chastisement of the burning Fire.'* (Qur'an, 22:3-4)**

Imam Zayn al-Abidin (A), in his monumental work, *The Treatise of Rights*<sup>2</sup>, detailed four types of rights related to seeking and giving advice, under the chapters, 'The right of one who seeks advice', 'The right of one whose advice you seek', 'The right of one who asks your counsel', and 'The right of the counsellor'<sup>3</sup>. The Imam states that amongst the rights of the seeker of advice 'is that you give him your counsel but you conduct yourself toward him with compassion and kindness.'

It is therefore necessary for every individual to equip himself with a wide range of Islamic knowledge, in the fields of history, ethics, law and family matters, so that as and when advice is sought from him, he is

in a position to provide the seeker of guidance with the best knowledge possible in the area wherein guidance is required.

## Story 1

Sayyid Adil al-Alawi narrates:

‘Ayatullah Mar’ashi Najafi was speaking to us about ethics and spirituality. One day, he spoke about envy. He said envy in its primary stage is like a black dot in the heart of the envious one. It is necessary for the envious person to cure himself through different methods mentioned by the scholars of ethics.

‘[Ayatullah Mar’ashi Najafi] narrated that firstly, the envious person should ask Allah to remove the envy from his heart and he should contemplate on restraining himself from indulging in this habit. And he should contemplate on why he wishes blessings should leave the brother whom he envies. He should consider that Allah is the One who gives and withdraws blessings and He is the source of both benefit and harm. He should seek to receive from his Lord the same blessings that have reached the person he is envious of. And through these methods he should cure himself. If the seed of envy is not removed from its inception, it will grow into a dark tree shadowing the whole existence of that person. He [Ayatullah Mar’ashi Najafi] then related:

“My father used to attend the lessons of al-Muhaqqiq al-Akhundi<sup>4</sup> and I used to travel with him when he went to these lessons. On the road, he used to see somebody wearing scholarly garments. Whenever he used to see him, he used to pray against him saying, ‘O Allah, remain far from him in this world and the next.’ I heard this statement from him many times. So one day, I asked my father what the reason for this prayer was. My father told me, ‘This person you see used to attend the lessons of al-Akhundi with another Shaykh. Al-Akhundi used to praise his friend for his intelligence and understanding and so he became envious of his friend and the seed of envy began to grow in his heart. One day, his friend became sick and I went with him to visit his friend. When this Shaykh entered to meet his friend, he said, “I have your medicine,” and gave it to him to drink. After a little while, this poor man began vomiting and his colour changed and after some hours he died and I realised that he had been given poison. That deed was motivated by his overpowering envy and because of that crime, four of his children became orphaned.<sup>5</sup> This is what envy did to him; it [envy] will erase faith just as the fire consumes fuel.’”

## Story 2

Ayatullah Sayyid Muhammad al-Ha’iri narrates:

‘Sayyid Qadhi Tabatabai was a student of Mirza Shirazi in Najaf. The people of Tabriz insisted that he come to guide their town and when he decided to respond to them, he said to his teacher, “The time to learn from you has passed and now I need a programme to follow in order to develop myself.”

‘Mirza Shirazi responded, “Make a time every evening to think about what has happened in the day. Think of the blessings Allah gave you and thank Him for them. And think of the trials that Allah took away by His mercy and thank Him for them. Think of the sins you committed; perform repentance and return to Him so that you are able to proceed.<sup>6</sup> God-willing you will achieve a connection with Allah. I don’t have any practical guidance to give you that is better than this.”

### Story 3

A renowned scholar relates:

‘When I was a young man studying as a student, some students were tested; they were backbiting about Ayatullah Sayyid Hujjati in a gathering whilst he was there. I heard the backbiting whilst the gathering was going on. The Sayyid was my teacher and I studied under him for quite some time and I even received a gift from him for my diligence.

‘After leaving this gathering, I sat down and blamed myself for having listened to and thereby participated in the backbiting of the Sayyid. I decided to look for an opportunity to meet him to apologise and seek forgiveness and eventually, I received the opportunity. Sayyid Hujjati was going for the *ziyarah* of Sayyid Abdul Adhim and so I went to the house in which he was staying, to meet him. When the door was opened for me, I said, “Tell Ayatullah Hujjati I am here at the door.” The Sayyid was in his room and told me to come in. When I saw him, he was putting his cap on his head and reclining against a pillow. He was unwell and tired in his old age.

‘I said, “My master, I came to tell you something. I did not backbite about you but I listened to other people backbiting and now I greatly regret it. I decided to meet you and have resolved never to listen to any backbiting again from now on. Thus, I came to ask you to forgive me.”<sup>7</sup> Ayatullah Hujjati replied very politely, “Backbiting against us is of two kinds. Either it is a mockery against Islam<sup>8</sup> or it is personal and against an individual.”

‘Because I knew by his statement that he was questioning me as to which type of backbiting I had listened to, I replied accordingly, “I did not mock Islam but it was personal, against you.” Ayatullah Hujjati replied, “If that’s the case, then I forgive you!”

The scholar narrated this incident concerning his own mistake in a lecture about seeking repentance, saying thereafter, ‘Indeed when a person seeks repentance, he must return the right of the one he hurt. If the person has died, he must seek forgiveness from Allah for that matter and he should do something good on the person’s behalf until he achieves his pleasure.’<sup>9</sup>

The scholar who sought forgiveness from Ayatullah Hujjati was Ayatullah Shahid Murtadha Mutahhari.<sup>10</sup>

## Story 4

Shaykh Faiyaz Jaffer says that Shaykh Abul Hasan al-Yemeni narrates:

‘On the night of Laylatul Qadr, Ayatullah Sayyid Taqi al-Modarressi was giving a lecture, preparing the scholars for the night’s worship and etiquettes.

‘He said, “Tonight, when you go home and make your supplications, seek long and hard for whatever you want from this world. But tonight, do not forget to seek long and hard from Allah for the opening and flourishing of your intellect. For without intellect, we are worth absolutely nothing.”<sup>11</sup>

## Story 5

The author narrates:

‘I and three other students based in the West, came to the end of the year in the hawzah and sought an audience with Ayatullah Sayyid Muhammad Taqi al-Modarressi to seek his advice regarding our duties when we returned to our respective countries to perform *tabligh* and other services.

‘Ayatullah al-Modarressi responded by asking each of us where we were based and about our family roots; two replied saying they were from the Khoja community, one living in the States and the other in the UK; the third, a convert, represented the third generation in his family to be living in the States whilst his family was originally from Austria; and the fourth, also a convert, lived in England but was originally from Scotland.

‘Ayatullah al-Modarressi explained, “The reason why I asked you where you’re from is because every people have their positive and negative attributes, specific to them. Once I knew your location and roots I could better cater this advice to the communities you’re going back to serve.

“I am very familiar with the Khoja community. They are very organised and have a good structure and administrative processes like elections and so on; I am also familiar with their challenges. All people retain certain characteristics and so, whilst there will be qualities unique to the communities in East Africa, America or Europe, there are also some common attributes that you can all derive certain benefits from.

“Whilst I lack full familiarity with the Scottish community, I am aware that they have retained certain characteristics that have led to their modern day challenges. These traits need to be understood, restrained and moulded towards betterment. For example, in the Scottish community, there is often a lot of extreme factionalism.<sup>12</sup> The fact is that if you return to Scotland for services, you will primarily have non-Muslim communities around you and not immigrant Muslim communities. “Hence you should be looking to make a social change; a true scholar and intelligent person does this. He realises it is unrealistic to bring everyone into the fold of Islam and so works on bringing them to the morality of being

a good human being. I would rather they be non-Muslims but non-Muslims who do not lie, do not drink alcohol, do not possess traits of an immoral nature. If you can change things on this level, relative to their situation, you will have achieved a lot.

“The true scholar and intelligent person is the one who leaves a positive effect on the people around him. It is narrated by the Ahlul Bayt that a community continues to receive blessings for forty days after a scholar passes away from the community.

“One day, a teacher of mine passed away. In his will, he had written that he wished to be buried temporarily in the graveyard known as Bustan al-Zahra and if after 10 years, the route to Karbala became open, he wished to be reburied in Karbala. The will continued, stating that if after another 10 years, the road to Karbala was still blocked, then he should be buried permanently in the graveyard in the area of Shaykhiyyah in Qom.

“The time passed and after 10 years, the road to Karbala was closed and after another 10 years, the time came to bury him in Qom. When the caretaker brought up the coffin, he asked, ‘How many days had he been buried?’ due to the weight of the body. We were shocked because this meant that after two decades, the body had not decayed for it to still weighed the normal weight of a man!

“Another of my teachers went to ensure the final burial rites were observed and noticed a large crowd around the coffin; some people were reciting Qur’an for him and others were giving out food on his behalf, but none of them had any direct connection with him. Upon enquiring why this was the case, he [my teacher] was directed to the lady who had organised the gathering and asked her why she was there.

“She replied, ‘My father was buried in this graveyard 40 years ago and I have been praying and begging to see him in a dream ever since; he never came until yesterday. I asked him why he had not visited until now, to which he replied, ‘I had been imprisoned by my sins until yesterday, when a light came and freed me from this imprisonment.’”

‘Ayatullah al-Modarressi concluded, “That light was this scholar buried here; his very presence had such an effect on those around him. In the same way, when you go for *tabligh* and services, my advice is to be of benefit to people so that you may impact them in life and in death; a scholar should be like this.”

## Story 6

Upon his departure from the Hawzah, one of the students sat with Ayatullah Sayyid Muhammad Husayni Shirazi to receive some parting words.

Ayatullah Shirazi asked him, ‘How many languages do you know?’ He replied, ‘Six: English, Swahili, Katchi, Gujerati, Urdu and Arabic.’

‘Good,’ Ayatullah Shirazi responded, ‘Then know that you’re responsible to each and every person who speaks these languages in the *ummah*. Go and translate and write books in these languages so that people read and benefit from them.’

## Story 7

The author narrates:

‘A group of youths and volunteers from the United States were given an audience with Ayatullah Sayyid Ali Husayni al-Sistani during their visitation to Najaf.

‘Due to the size of the group, Ayatullah al-Sistani held the first session with the men and addressed them saying:

“I advise you to increase your *taqwa* [God-consciousness] and to consider the necessity of the constant acquisition of *ilm* [knowledge]. I advise you to have a strong relationship with the Holy Quran, by regularly reading it. To achieve this, you must intellectually interact and be open to its truths and reflect and ponder deeply on its verses. Maintain the highest of morals and good manners for it is expected that a Shi’a of the Ahlul Bayt is distinguished amongst the people by his lofty character.

“At present, there is a global economic crisis especially affecting Europe and North America. During these trying times, the most important thing is to remain God-conscious in our transactions and this will see us through this period.”

‘Thereafter, the brothers bade him farewell and left. When the ladies gathered, he reiterated his prayer for us all and his call for God-consciousness, acquiring of knowledge, whilst also emphasising the importance of the Holy Qur’an and good manners.

‘He then addressed the sisters with advice pertinent to them as he had done with the brothers and asked them, as primary care givers in the family, to pay special attention to how their children were raised. He emphasised their good training and attention to manners and ethics. He continued:

“I would like to remind you about the matters of our dress code and the sanctity of what we speak. It is necessary that we adhere to the best and modest ways of dress and we always say what is pure and free of evil; it is through our manners, our dress code and speech that we should be distinguished from others and recognised as the Shi’as of the Ahlul Bayt.

“Today, there are many extreme ideologies in the world and it is our duty to be balanced and walk upon the middle path in life, just as the Holy Qur’an says,

***‘Do not become extreme in your religion.’ (Qur’an, 4:171 & Qur’an, 5:77)***

‘He spent more than twice as long with the sisters than with the brothers. As they departed, each person

asked for his/her individual needs and that His Eminence should pray for him/her and he responded to each request by praying for each individual then and there. His Eminence thanked everyone for visiting and also conveyed his condolences on the martyrdom of Lady Fatimah (A).’

1. Al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 78, p. 358.

2. <http://www.al-islam.org/treatise-rights-risalat-al-huquq-imam-zain-ul-ab...> [1]

3. Treatise of Rights, Chapters 40–44.

4. Author of al-Kifayat al-Usul

5. This action is the manifestation of the noble verses, ‘And amongst men there is one whose speech in this life attracts you; he even makes Allah his witness as to what is in his heart; yet he is the most violent of adversaries.’ (Qur’an, 2:204) and ‘But if they give you the lie, then say, “Your Lord is the Lord of all-encompassing Mercy and His punishment cannot be averted from the guilty people.”’ (Qur’an, 6:147)

6. This practice is the manifestation of the noble verses, ‘O you who believe! Take care of your souls.’ (Qur’an, 5:105), ‘Read your book; your own self is sufficient as a reckoner against you this day.’ (Qur’an, 17:14), ‘O you who believe! Be careful of your duty to Allah and let every soul consider what it has sent on for the morrow. And be careful of your duty to Allah; surely Allah is aware of what you do.’ (Qur’an, 59:18) and ‘Then let man look to his food.’ (Qur’an, 80:24).

7. This practice is the manifestation of the noble narration from Prophet Muhammad (S), ‘Backbiting is worse than adultery,’ to which he was asked, ‘How so?’ He replied, ‘A man commits adultery and then repents and Allah pardons him for it, whereas the backbiter is not forgiven until his victim forgives him.’ (al-Targhib wa al-Tarhib, vol. 3, p. 511, hadith no. 24) and ‘Whoever backbites a fellow Muslim man or woman, Allah neither accepts his prayers nor his fasting for forty days and nights unless the victim of his backbiting forgives him.’ (Al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 75, p. 258, hadith no. 53)

8. This statement is a manifestation of the noble verse, ‘Indeed He has revealed to you in the Book that when you hear Allah’s communications being disbelieved in and mocked at, do not sit with them until they enter into some other discourse, otherwise surely you would be like them. Surely Allah will gather together the hypocrites.’ (Qur’an, 4:140)

9. This practice is the manifestation of the noble narration from Prophet Muhammad (S) who was asked about the penance for backbiting, to which he replied, ‘You must seek Allah’s forgiveness on behalf of the one you have talked about every time you remember him.’ (al-Kafi, vol. 2, p. 357, hadith no. 4)

10. This incident is a manifestation of the noble verse,

‘As for him who repents and believes and does good, it may be that he will be among the successful ones.’ (Qur’an, 28:67)

11. This statement is a manifestation of the noble verses, ‘What! Do you ... neglect your own souls whilst you read the Book? Have you then no intellect?’ (Qur’an, 2:44) and ‘Whatever things you have been given are only a provision of this world’s life and its adornment. And whatever is with Allah is better and more lasting; do you not then apply your intellect?’ (Qur’an, 28:60). In this regard Imam al-Sadiq (A) is narrated to have said, ‘Much contemplation on matters of wisdom causes the intellect to flourish.’ (Al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 78, p. 247, hadith no. 73)

12. Asabiyyah.

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## Links

[1] <http://www.al-islam.org/treatise-rights-risalat-al-huquq-imam-zain-ul-abideen>