

Introducing Imam Husayn to Humanity: Spiritual Advice for Organizations

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Abstract

This paper is based on a lecture given in the city of Mashhad, during the gathering with representatives of the WhoIsHussain global campaign, which aims to educate and inspire humanity on Imam Husayn, the third Imam, and the values he stood for; as well as bringing positive changes at the grassroots level from helping the homeless, to feeding the hungry, to donating blood.

In this lecture, Huj. Sh. Mohammad Ali Shomali praises the group for their efforts, and acknowledges this project as an exceptional one, due to the importance of reaching out and making Imam Husayn known and beneficial to humanity. He also gave gentle and thought-provoking ideas and reminders to the group regarding the importance of being far-sighted in our approaches, being genuine in our love for people, being sincere and disinterested in power and position, uniting the Ummah rather using our institutions to divide it, increasing in our humbleness when we witness success, and focusing on moving towards the truth and serving it rather than egotistically bringing it to our side. In this way, we uphold Imam Husayn's principles, which is ever more needed as we approach the time of Imam Mahdi (aj).

It is a great blessing from Allah to be here near the shrine of Imam al-Ridha (a) and in your presence to talk about Imam Husayn (a) in the way that our love for him can help us prepare for the coming of Imam Mahdi (a). I thank Allah and I thank all of you, and the Who is Husayn team and volunteers, including those who were unable to be here; for sure their hearts are with us. We remember them and pray for them insha-Allah. There are few things I thought we need to remind ourselves of today, so I will try to be brief and I pray to Him to remove the blockage from my tongue so as to do justice.

First of all, we are not only interested in showing our love to Imam Husayn and gaining some reward

(*thawaab*) from it, though it is definitely part of the reason for the Who is Husayn campaign. But I think what motivated you is more than that.

Unfortunately, we sometimes become very selfish, even when it comes to religion and spirituality. Sometimes we just want to add to our reward—like a businessman—although instead of money we want a reward. And sometimes the pleasure of Allah becomes secondary. Gaining rewards seems to be the main thing for many, though we sometimes forget that there can actually be a greater reward for something from which you do not expect a reward for. In your work, business, and overall lives, many times you have been blessed during unexpected times.

An important example is in the Qur'an regarding Prophet Moses. When he was traveling with his family in a dark and presumably cold night he saw a fire.² He told his family to wait where they were while he goes to check, which indicates that the fire was not in front of them. Because if it was in front of them, they would have been able to see it. He saw the fire on the side and went himself to check it. A leader does not take the entire community where he is unsure. If there is any risk, the least he can do is examine the area and environment; and if there is proof of overall goodness, it can be offered to the rest of the community.

When Prophet Moses checked, an unbelievable event occurred: God addressed him for the first time. God spoke to him and told him that He had chosen him and has a mission for him. The story is mentioned in the Qur'an as follows:

وَهَلْ أَتَاكَ حَدِيثُ مُوسَىٰ إِذْ رَأَىٰ نَارًا فَقَالَ لِأَهْلِهِ امْكُثُوا إِنِّي آنَسْتُ نَارًا لَّعَلِّي آتِيكُم مِّنْهَا بِقَبَسٍ أَوْ أَجِدُ عَلَى النَّارِ هُدًى لَّمَّا أَتَاهَا نُودِيَ يَا مُوسَىٰ إِنِّي أَنَا رَبُّكَ فَاخْلَعْ نَعْلَيْكَ ۖ إِنَّكَ بِالْوَادِ الْمُقَدَّسِ طُوًى ۚ إِنَّا اخْتَرْنَاكَ فَاسْتَمِعْ لِمَا يُوحَىٰ

Did the story of Moses come to you, when he sighted a fire, and said to his family, 'Wait! Indeed I descry a fire! Maybe I will bring you a brand from it, or find some guidance at the fire.' So when he came to it, he was called, 'O Moses! Indeed I am your Lord! So take off your sandals. You are indeed in the sacred valley of Tuwa. I have chosen you; so listen to what is revealed. (20:9-13)

Did Moses expect this to happen while he was traveling? No. Perhaps his maximum expectation was to travel safely with his family and arrive at their destination. But Allah blessed him with something unexpected.

And it is important to note that if Moses had all his qualities and practices, but failed to be alert at that time, he would have missed this opportunity. He was not only farsighted, but he was also broad-sighted. He saw right and left; behind and front. This is what a leader must do. Because he was alert and did not dismiss anything, he went and checked and saw the most beautiful thing awaiting him.

Thus, we should be very alert and careful so that we do not lose what is unexpected, as well as great opportunities that await us. In an interesting hadith, we read that Imam Sadiq (a) said:

With respect to what you have no hope for, be more hopeful than what you have hope for. Truly Moses (a) went [just] to bring a brand of fire to his family, but he returned to them while he was a Prophet and Messenger.[3](#)

I hope Allah (swt) would bless your activities throughout your lives, and in particular the activities you do for Imam Husayn and Imam Mahdi, and surprise you with many blessings, including those you did not expect. But that needs alertness. That needs openness. Do not limit Allah's blessings to merely come through the channels that you define for Allah. Ask Him to bless you in every possible thing. There are many projects in the community, but I very much like projects like Who is Husayn because these are exceptional ones that we as a community have come to realize to be responsible for to reach out. Most of our projects, especially what we do for Imam Husayn (a) merely or at least primarily serve our internal needs.

But this is one of those exceptional projects that aim at reaching out and is based on the understanding that we have a historical duty which, unfortunately, has not been sufficiently and adequately dealt with in the past. It is embarrassing to know that after 14 centuries there are people in the world who still do not know Imam Husayn. Really embarrassing. There are contemporary figures like Nelson Mandela, Gandhi and Mother Theresa that almost every educated person knows about and respects. And this took only a few decades. For almost fourteen centuries, Imam Husayn has been a gift for humanity and yet many still do not know him. Who is responsible? Who should feel embarrassed? We should.

This project is to undertake the responsibility of reaching out and introducing Imam Husayn to humanity. Not because we are Shi'a. Not because we love Imam Husayn. Not because we want to gain something. No. Because we feel humanity needs Husayn. We want to benefit humanity.

In all your activities, it is very important to always be genuine in the love you show for people. Do not do anything merely for publicity. Only do things with unconditional love. The Qur'an says:

كُنْتُمْ خَيْرَ أُمَّةٍ أُخْرِجَتْ لِلنَّاسِ

You are the best nation [ever] brought forth for mankind. (3: 110)

This verse tells us that to be the best means to be the best people God has brought about for mankind, and not over people (*li-naas*, not *'ala al-naas*). We are not interested in power or position. We want to serve. We want to serve humanity without any expectation. We do not want to be thanked or praised or to have status and power, or marginalize any sect in Islam. We just want to help. The Qur'an says:

إِنَّمَا نَطْعِمُكُمْ لَوَجْهِ اللَّهِ لَا نُرِيدُ مِنْكُمْ جَزَاءً وَلَا شُكُورًا

We feed you only for the sake of Allah. We do not want any reward from you nor any thanks.

If we do anything, we just want to please Allah; we do not even want to be thanked or praised.

We want to serve humanity by introducing Imam Husayn to them. Because we believe that in all ages and corners of world humanity always needs people like Husayn to inspire. Husayn is not a man that can be limited to a particular time, place, or even religion. Real servants of God are those who are absorbed, taken by the light of God—they move beyond the geographical boundaries, beyond time and space. In the same way God is not bound to time and space, Godly people also can travel beyond time and space.

Imam Husayn—by emptying himself from ego as much as he could— and then by God having a special plan for him to purify him further (33:33), is a man of God. You do not find any trace of ego in Imam Husayn, nor with his true companions. These people had the quality of becoming universal. Husayn is a universal figure. Especially when we read our hadith and reflect on it about Imam Mahdi, we see there is a message, a direction, an instruction there that we perhaps we didn't notice beforehand.

Imam Husayn plays a special role in paving the way for the coming of Imam Mahdi, and moreover, for the success of Imam Mahdi. Many of the hadiths about the End of Times mention Imam Husayn. I firmly believe that without mention of him, Imam Mahdi would not be able to succeed. Maybe people think Imam Husayn was more known when we approach the time of his martyrdom and we should try to remember him so that he is not gradually forgotten. There are personalities with respect to whom you need to be very careful so that passage of time would not affect them or make them 'outdated,' but this is not the case about Imam Husayn.

Imam Husayn is meant for the future, not merely for his own time. The passage of time and human experiences, especially the challenges humanity faces throughout the centuries, more so sparks people's curiosity about Imam Husayn and the values he stood for. The best time for people to know and understand Imam Husayn is close to the time of the Imam Mahdi's reappearance. But this is not a miracle that we should wait to happen. This requires our effort. Something will happen but who is going to ensure that it does in our time? This is us. If not us, there will be others. But then we would be denying ourselves this blessing.

Imam Husayn is a universal figure who has the solution—the medicine—from God for humanity. And this man is ever more needed as we approach the time of Imam Mahdi.

I would like to refer to one hadith, when Imam Husayn in night of Ashura quoted from the Prophet:

My grandfather, the Messenger of God, said: "My son Husayn will be killed in Karbala while he is a stranger, alone, thirsty, and without help. Whoever helps him has helped me and has helped his son, the Hujjah [al-Mahdi]."4

There is no way to help Husayn properly, with understanding, unless you would strengthen Islam and the Ummah. Those who think they can promote the cause of Ahlul Bayt and their teachings by dividing the Ummah—making Shi'a against Sunni, Sunni against Shi'a—are wrong. Anything properly done for the Ahlul Bayt would strengthen the Prophet and the Ummah. Islamic unity is very important for us. How can anyone serve Islam and the Ahlul Bayt by dividing the Ummah or humanity? It is impossible.

The Prophet also said that not only has he helped me (which you may say it is easy to understand because Imam Husayn saved Islam) but he also said, “*Whoever helps Husayn has helped his son, the Hujjah [al-Mahdi].*”

This is important. Anything we do for Imam Husayn with knowledge (*ma'rifah*), with insight (*basirah*), with sincerity, in right direction would help Imam Mahdi, whether we know it or not; whether we mention the name of the Imam or not. We do not need to merely repeat the name of the Imam. Anything we do—our words and actions—that resemble the message of Imam Husayn or upholds his principles helps. Sometimes you may mention the name; other times it may be unwise depending on the context. Either way, anyone who promotes the values Imam Husayn exhibited in the best way is indeed helping Imam Mahdi.

So there must be dynamism in our works for Imam Husayn. Unfortunately, some are static in their efforts for Husayn. They lose the vision of the future. They enjoy remembering the Imam and cry for him, yet without completing this process by drawing lessons for both the present and the future. The Prophet's saying reminds us that Husayn is a point of direction in the past and future: if we understand what to do with respect to Imam Husayn, we would be continuing the efforts put forth from the beginning of Islam until the end of the world. All would be all harmonious.

We must always remember this. Merely having a good intention, or undertaking a noble cause, is not enough. There are many aspects to consider and we constantly must reflect on the requirements of this great task. Moreover, we are to consider how to improve, especially when there are signs of success:

إِذَا جَاءَ نَصْرُ اللَّهِ وَالْفَتْحُ وَرَأَيْتَ النَّاسَ يَدْخُلُونَ فِي دِينِ اللَّهِ أَفْوَاجًا

When Allah's help comes with victory, and you see the people entering Allah's religion in throngs... (110: 1-2)

If you see victories come from Allah and you see people flocking towards His path in masses, do not sit back, nor praise yourself, nor forget how much Allah has blessed you. That is the time that you are to have maximum reliance on Allah. When you see success, praise and glorify God and ask for forgiveness. Do not let self-conceit and arrogance seep in, as that would be the end of any success. In a well-known hadith, Imam Sadiq (a) is quoted as saying:

The one into whose heart self-admiration ('ujb) permeates is destined to be destroyed.[5](#)

If any person, organization, or nation take the blessings of Allah for granted and want to take credit for themselves, that is the end of it. When you see success, do more worship (*'ibadah*) and ask more for forgiveness (*istighfar*):

فَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ وَاسْتَغْفِرْهُ ۚ إِنَّهُ كَانَ تَوَّابًا

Then celebrate the praise of your Lord, and plead to Him for forgiveness. Indeed He is all-clement. (110:3)

These people do not see any success from themselves; their only worry is whether (and how much) they have narrowed the channels of mercy of Allah. Let me honestly tell you: most of the time, we act as barriers for Allah's mercy to come. If we are experiencing good days, with good understanding, we merely let the mercy of Allah come without adding to it, without attracting more light. All you and I need to do is try not to narrow the channels of Allah's mercy. This requires stepping on our ego, as ego is big problem.

I wish we had time to reflect more on some passages of Dua Makarim al-Akhlaq especially concerning the lessons organizations can take from it. I will mention a few. Imam Zayn al-Abideen says:

وَأَعِزَّنِي وَلَا تَبْتَلِيَنِّي بِالْكِبَرِ

Exalt me and afflict me not with pride.

Oh Allah, please give me honour and dignity. Perhaps the most important message for humanity from the life and message of Imam Husayn is honour and dignity. I think more than anything else Imam Husayn can be introduced as an icon of honour and dignity. That is what humanity needs, especially when basic needs are already met. Food, shelter, and clothing are their basic necessities, although gradually these things will be provided. However, honour is the most important. If you have physical life without honour and dignity, there is no value.

But we are to be cautious; when Allah gifts us with honour and dignity in the eyes of the people, do not think that you are special. Do not suffer from ego.

وَأَعِزَّنِي وَلَا تَبْتَلِيَنِّي بِالْكِبَرِ

Exalt me and afflict me not with pride.

Please give me honour, and not arrogance. It is difficult to have one without the other. When people praise us, and there are signs of success, we are at risk for thinking we are special or privileged. We

may think it to be due to our talents, hard work, or a secret goodness in ourselves. And even wondering why others do not possess the same. We tend to forget that our good reputation and successes can be a test, a trust, rather than our own achievements.

وَعَبِّدْنِي لَكَ وَلَا تُفْسِدْ عِبَادَتِي بِالْعُجْبِ

Make me worship Thee and corrupt not my worship with self-admiration!

Oh Allah, please make me your servant and use us for your purpose. We do not have a personal purpose. Why are we in this gathering? Are we after anything for ourselves? No. We are here to think, discuss, and pray to Allah to help us understand how we can best make the most out of what He made available to us.

O Allah, please do not let my services to you be corrupted by self-admiration. Even good services can be corrupted after the action through self-admiration ('ujb). If there is no sincerity before the action, then it is already useless.

And then Imam reaches this point after a few sentences:

وَلَا تَرْفَعْنِي فِي النَّاسِ دَرَجَةً إِلَّا حَطَطْتَنِي عِنْدَ نَفْسِي مِثْلَهَا

O Allah, raise me not a single degree before the people without lowering me its like in myself.

If my position and respect in the society increases by 10% please add 10% to my humbleness to remain balanced. So if you were completing successful projects before with 50% humbleness, your humbleness must increase afterwards. So if you are as humble as you used to be, it is not enough. You need to be humbler. Otherwise, you would become arrogant.

وَلَا تُحْدِثْ لِي عِزًّا ظَاهِرًا إِلَّا أَحْدَثْتَ لِي ذِلَّةً بَاطِنَةً عِنْدَ نَفْسِي بِقَدَرِهَا

...and bring about no outward exaltation for me without an inward abasement in myself to the same measure.

Please do not create for me any external honour unless you give me internal humbleness proportional to that. This is very important for individuals and organizations. Sometimes institutions think that because they are to promote the institution, they can forget about, or compromise, humbleness. They may mistakenly think humbleness is for the individuals; promoting an organization is something else. But this is wrong. You must promote your organization, but in a humble way. And that can be tested in the way you interact with other organizations.

My last sentence to remain in our mind: *haqq* (truth) and *bātil* (falsehood), always oppose each other. Like light and darkness. These two would never be separate from each other. We are to ensure that we are on the side of *haqq*, and not *bātil*. It is not about 'Bringing the truth to my side'. This is the problem. Many want to be the truth and think 'Look at me; I represent the truth. I am the voice of the truth. I am a representative of the truth'. No. You must move towards truth. You must be a mirror of the truth. Do not think or say, 'I represent the truth'. Who are we to represent the truth? Who are we to represent Islam or the Ahlul Bayt or Imam Husayn? Our responsibility is to try to move towards the truth to reflect it. We never would be able to claim that we are certainly and entirely on the side of the truth. It is a matter of struggle—lifelong struggle—to ensure we will be with the truth. It is only a few people for whom this has been confirmed. For example, we read about Imam Ali:

علي مَعَ الْحَقِّ وَالْحَقُّ مَعَ عَلِيٍّ

Ali is with the truth; and the truth is with Ali.

That is for Ali. Not for us. We must never think we are on the side of the truth and take it for granted. Yes, maybe in a few aspects we can be right; in many things we can be wrong. So first, we have to struggle to always to be on the side of the truth.

Secondly—please remember this point, a result of my life I am sharing with you—*haqq* can never be served, or promoted, by using the means of *bātil*. We cannot spread light by using means of darkness. We can never serve Allah by doing Satanic things and thinking we are clever; no lying, dishonesty, selfishness, jealousy, or the like can help you in your sacred struggles.

One of the greatest victories of *bātil* is to convince the people of *haqq* to use the means of *bātil*. This is impossible to work. How can you serve Allah by being immoral or sinning? Look at Imam Husayn. When he was challenged—and I do not think there is any way to be challenged like Imam Husayn—in those few days, especially on Day of Ashura, it was more than what one person can be challenged within 100 years. For example, sometimes people in their entire life lose one, two or ten loved ones and they feel completely frustrated and life becomes miserable for them. No one has lost in such a short time so many family members and companions, in addition to being treated so badly. And they did this to Husayn in the name of Islam, in the name of the Prophet.

But for the sake of Allah—correct me if I'm wrong or if I'm exaggerating—do not think we are Shi'a, or Sheikh Shomali is a Shi'a, therefore we must support him even if he errs. If you want to support me, correct me. Was Husayn immoral or did he compromise in the least any virtues, especially during the challenging time of war? Or do we witness Husayn (a) at the highest level of extra caution with regards to maintaining good virtues, especially during hard times? Did he ever lie or deceive his friends by making false promises, or lie to his enemies?

Did he show any sign of fear, selfishness, jealousy, despair, or any other vices you can think of? So, we must insha–Allah remind ourselves and each other that we must constantly and consistently struggle to follow the truth and use permissible and moral means to attain it. Nothing false or immoral can help us in this.

I ask Allah to bless all of you and all people in all parts of the world who try to follow the truth. May Allah enable us to be the generation that are preparing for the coming of Imam al–Mahdi. May Allah enable us to be the generation to set up a universal community of brotherhood under the banner of truth at the service of humanity which would be led by Imam al–Mahdi. May Allah grant all your requests while you are in this sacred city and grant recovery to all the illnesses of our bodies, minds and hearts. And may Allah remove any obstacles between us and Him.

1. This paper is based on a lecture given on 25th Dec 2016 by the author in the gathering of the representatives of whoishosseini from different continents in Mashhad.

2. I say dark and cold because that's when fire becomes more interesting. He said to his family, 'Wait, I see a friendly fire'. Sometimes a building is on fire, but the one who sees this fire would not say “نَاسْتُو نَافِرَان.” But this was a friendly fire, a fire that was not harmful, not even producing heat when it was already hot, or giving light when already bright. For this reason I think it was cold in a dark night.

3. Al–Kafi, vol. 5, p. 83.

4. Ma‘ali al–Sibtayn, vol. 1, p. 208.

5. Al–Kafi, vol. 2, p. 313.

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