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Letters

[Fatimah Tabataba'i's Letter to Imam Khomeini](#)

In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful

*The fragrance of union with you
has ignited these sparks within me;
But grief in my breast for you
has extinguished their flaring in me.
What a sign to the worlds are you,
worlds resounding so mournfully,
With cries to whom all praise is due,
extolling His endless Glory!¹*

My dear Imam, my revered guide!

Those responsible for the publication of your works have asked me to write what I know about the manner in which you composed your mystic² poetry, so that a small window could thereby be opened upon this dimension of your existence for the eyes of your devotees. But when I pick up the pen, the sorrow of your loss keeps me from writing, and grief over your departures does not release me. Alas, without you, our house has no light or radiance. Every place in the house bears some token of you. The perfume of your presence is everywhere. Your little 'Ali³ is constantly looking for you and asking about you. Since we told him that you are in heaven, in his eagerness to see you he keeps on gazing toward the sky and the stars.

No more than three months have elapsed since your spiritual journey. Every day your devotees gather at the *Husayniyyah*⁴ and at your house and weep like bereaved lovers. They strew petals in the passageway between the house and the *Husayniyyah*.

My *pir*!⁵ You were aware of your lover's state: you knew about my enamored soul, and you knew how enthralled by you and how agitated I am, so how could you leave me alone? How can I, who have spent

my entire life in the shining rays of your existence, now live in darkness?!

In this, my black night, I've lost the way to my intended.

Come out from some corner, oh star of guidance![6](#)

I will leave an account of this sore grief and anguish for another opportunity, and confine myself to what has been requested of me, because:

The stories of the gnostic masters nourish the soul.

Go, ask of the mystery; then come, and tell us the tale.[7](#)

When I was reading philosophical texts required for my field of study, I would occasionally bring some of the difficult and obscure passages of a book before Imam (may his grave be hallowed) for consultation. These question and answer periods were soon transformed into twenty minute lessons. One morning when I went to him to begin a lesson, I discovered that he had written me a warning in a satirical quatrain:

Fati, who studies the branches of philosophy,

Knows only 'ph', 'I', and 's' of philosophy,[8](#)

My hope is that in the light of God

She may unveil herself of philosophy!

After receiving this quatrain, I very persistently began to request other verses. A few days later:

Fati, one must journey to the Friend,

The self of one's own self one must transcend!

Bits of knowledge that toward yourself tend

Are devils to avoid in the way you wend.[9](#)

Little by little, my insistent pleas had their effect, for a little later he composed this:

Fati, you and the Reality of gnosis.

what does it mean?!

To apprehend the essence without attributes,

what does it mean?!

Without study of 'A', you shall not find your way to 'Z'.

Without having entered the spiritual path, being gifted

what does it mean?!

I listened with my entire soul to such succinctly expressed quatrains of enlightening advice. I hung them like pendants from my ears and became intoxicated by their sweetness. Suddenly, I came to realize that it would be a pity for message about gnosis such as these to be kept private. Therefore, I boldly persisted in my request that he not abandon the line he had taken up with composition of these

messages. I must confess that I was encouraged to persevere by the boundless kindness of that dear, and so, I augmented my pleas with a request for *ghazal*. [10](#) He reproached me, saying, “What, am I a poet?!” But as before, I insistently persisted with my spiritual guide, and after a few days I heard this:

In so far as the Friend is, you will not be harmed.

In so far as He is, the dust of quality and quantity is naught

Abandon whatever there is, and choose Him.

There is no more excellent advice than these two words. [11](#)

You have not become a lover if you have a name.

You are not a mad if you have a message.

You have not become drunk if you have consciousness.

Be considerate with us until you have the goblet.

Days passed and every once in a while Imam paid the price of my ardent entreaties with a *ghazal* or with some writings. With this turn of events, I would allow no further delay, and I first showed the collection of quatrains to my spouse, Ahmad. [12](#) He also expressed his enthusiasm and encouraged me to pursue the case. So, I took a notebook to Imam and I requested that when suitable he inscribe therein his poems, admonitions, and mystical allusions... And it was in this way that he so graciously complied with my request and granted me a position from the table of his gnosis and generosity as provision for my journey, and he gave me something he had written which ended with a *ghazal*. It was a positive answer to my persistent request.

Now, the fruit of these efforts, that is, this valuable legacy, I place at the disposal of that respectable institute which publishes his works so that they may present it to the devotees of Imam, and thereby to provide the limpid water of this fountain for those who thirst. In this context I have other things to say which, if God grants me the opportunity, I shall relate.

In grief, untimely days elapsed;

Days accompanied by inner burning,

If the days have gone, let them go without fear,

But you stay, like unto whom there is no purity. [13](#)

Fatimah Tabataba'i

23/6/1368 AHS

(Sept. 12, 1989) [14](#)

[Imam Khomeini's Reply to Fatimah Tabataba'i](#)

In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful

My Dear Fati,

It seems that you have finally succeeded in your imposition on me to write a few lines, disregarding my excuses: old age, infirmity, and a full schedule. Now I will begin my speech with the blight of old age and of youth, both of which have afflicted me, or you could say, the ends of which I have reached. Now, inclining towards the *barzakh*,¹⁵ if not toward hell, I am wrestling with the minions of the angel of death. Tomorrow, the black letter of my deeds shall be handed to me, and I shall be asked for an account of my misspent life. I have no answer, except my hope in the mercy of He Whose mercy embraces all things,¹⁶ He who revealed to the Mercy of Worlds:¹⁷ “do not despair of the mercy of Allah; surely Allah forgives sins.”¹⁸

I take it that I am to be included among those to whom these *ayat*¹⁹ must be applied. But as for the ascension to the sacred premises of His greatness, and mounting to the neighborhood of the Friend, and joining in the banquet of Allah, to which one must arrive by means of the steps he himself has taken, how can it be? In my youth, when I had vigor and ability, die to the machinations of Satan and his minion, the commanding self,²⁰ I became preoccupied with various notions and grandiose expressions by which I acquired neither concentration nor a spiritual state, because I never took in the spirit of these things. I didn't go from the exoteric to the esoteric, from the earthly domain to the angelic domain. I finally realized that I did not gain anything from all the clamor of the casuistry of the seminary but some heart-rending words.

I was sunk so deeply among such expressions and such regards that instead of seeking to lift the veils, I collected books as if nothing else mattered in the entire world but a handful of papers. In the name of the humanities, divine goals and philosophical truth, the seeker, who has been endowed with a divine nature, is diverted and sinks beneath a great veil. The weighty tomes of *The Four Journeys*²¹ diverted me from my journey to the Friend; I acquired no opening from *The Openings*,²² nor any wisdom from *The Bezels of Wisdom*,²³ let alone from other books, for each of which is another sad story. When I reached old age, with every step, I was gradually drawn away²⁴ from that misfortune, until I reached senility, and what is beyond senility, with which I am now wrestling. “And among you are some who are brought back to a most decrepit life, so that they do not know anything after they had known.”²⁵

You, my daughter, are miles away from this stage. You have not savored its flavor. May God extend your life to such an age, but without its ill effects. You expect writings and discourses from me, and that in the form of a mixture of poetry and prose! You don't seem to realize that I am neither a writer nor a poet nor an orator. You, my dear daughter, without having reached the stage of unripe grapes, wish to attain the stage of confection made from boiled ripe grapes! Know that a day shall come when, God forbid, you will bear the heavy burden of regret upon your shoulders for having misspent your youth with such infatuations while you let the higher things escape you, just as I have, I who have fallen behind in the caravan of lovers. So, listen to this wretched who bears such a burden on his shoulders, and who is bent beneath it. Don't be satisfied with expressions such as these, which are a trap of the great

Beelzebub.[26](#)

Seek the Great and Glorious One! Youth with its delights and gratifications are soon past. I've been through it all, through all these, and now I'm wrestling with the chastisement of hell. The Satan within does not let up on me. May Almighty God forbid that he should strike the last blow. But despair of the embracing mercy of the Divine is itself a grievous enormity. May God protect the sinner from such an affliction. It is said that at the end of his life, Hajjaj ibn Yusuf,[27](#) that great murderer of history, said, "Oh God! Forgive me, even though I know that everyone says You will not forgive me!" Upon hearing of this, Shafi'i[28](#) said, "If he has said this, it may be (that he is forgiven)." But I don't know whether that wicked man was blessed to say this or not, but I know that despair is worse than anything.

Oh my daughter, don't be so overconfident of mercy that you neglect the Friend, nor should you despair and thus become one of those who has lost both this world and the hereafter. Oh God! By the five companions of the cloak,[29](#) shelter Ahmad, Fati, Hasan, Rida (Yasir) and 'Ali, who, we are proud to say, belong to the household of your dear Prophet, and to the household of his appointed one.[30](#) Shelter them from the evils of Satan and from the desires of the soul. Here ends my speech, and God's sentence upon me is complete. Peace!

Since you have demanded poems from me with that insistence which is so characteristic of you, I must confess that neither in my youth, which is the season of poetry and sensitivity, and which has now been spent, nor in the season of old age, which I have also left behind me, nor in this most decrepit state of life, with which I am now wrestling, have I ever had a talent for poetry. It is related that someone said, "My power is no different in old age from what it was in my youth, for I have remained unable to lift this stone both in youth and in old age." I could say the same thing about poetry and literature, for I have remained incapable of them through both my youth and old age. Thus I declare:

If 'poet' be the word for Sa'di of Shiraz,[31](#)

What you and I may weave is but a play of dross.[32](#)

Now, since I'm incapable of poetry, I'll play a trick[33](#) with doggerel, and so concede to your demands.

Ahmad is from Muhammad the chosen one

Whom the Praised One shall watch from above.[34](#)

Fati is from the throne of the womb of Fatimah

Whom the Creator of the heavens shall love.

Hasan, a fruit of this tree of beauty,

The Benefactor shall be his sure companion boon.

Yasir, of the pure house of the two offspring,[35](#)

The secrets of sanctity about him shall be strewn.

'Ali who is from the garden of 'Ali,

His slogan shall be 'Ali is great.

*Five persons from the loins of Ahmad
Shall find intercession from the four plus eight. [36](#)
My daughter asks me for fresh poetry,
Doggerel, I say, as mementoes of late.*

Again you ask for poetry, and yet again, so here is some more babble:

*I am a lover, a lover!
Except for union with You
there is no cure for this,
Who is there
whose soul has not been kindled
by this fire?
Except for you,
in the assembly of those burnt of heart,
nothing is remembered.
This is a story
with neither a beginning
nor an end.
The mystery of the heart
cannot be exposed
to anyone
Except to the Friend
for whom there is neither presence
nor absence.
With whom may I confide,
that one can never
see the Friend,
Unless neither thought
nor vision
is under his control?
Open a corner of your eye
to look
at this poor man;
Engage him with the play of love,
for this is a disorderly wilderness.
Open the cask
and fill the goblet to the brim.
Except for You,
None gives the true measure*

*nor keeps its promise.*³⁷

The tongue cannot be stilled

From the distracted talk

Of one in whose breast is only

a distracted heart.

Tear up the tablet,

break the pen,

and breath nothing more,

For there is no one

who is not baffled and bewildered

by Him.

Azar 1365 AHS

Rabi' ath-Thani 1407 AH

(November–December 1986)

1. Below is a more literal rendering of the same poem by Fatimah Tabataba'i'. Its four lines are in ghazal form, with first, second and fourth lines rhyming. The first line is in Arabic. Verse which mixes Arabic and Farsi is highly renowned. "The fragrance of union with you has ignited sparks of passion for you within me. Grief for you in my breast has kept the small fire from flaring, as you wished. What a sign you are to the worlds which are filled with the sound of the wailing of the holy, Which passes the apex of the beyond: Hail to the eternal Glory, hail!"
2. 'Irfani is the adjectival form of 'irfan, a kind of mysticism or gnosis which flourishes in the context of Shi'i Islam.
3. 'Ali is the son of Sayyid Ahmad, who is the son of Imam. 'Ali's mother is the author of this letter, Fatimah Tabataba'i'.
4. A Husayniyyah is a place for the remembrance of the third Imam, the grandson of the Prophet, Husayn, peace be with him. The Husayniyyah mentioned here is the place where Imam delivered his speeches, attached to his house in northern Tehran.
5. Pir literally means old man, but it is also used as spiritual title, especially among mystics, for one's spiritual master.
6. This couplet is from Hafiz.
7. This is another couplet from Hafiz.
8. In Arabic, these letters spell fals, a small coin, or farthing.
9. More literally:
Fati, one must journey toward the Friend,
One must pass beyond the self of one's self.
Everything known which has the scent of your being,
Is a devil in the way which you must avoid.
10. The ghazal is a lyric form of Persian poetry, with rhyme in the first two and in even numbered lines, and allowing various metric forms. With respect to content, it usually does not express the linear development of an idea, but rather its couplets express variations on an idea or mood.
11. The 'two words' are 'abandon' and 'choose,' which reflect the negative and positive elements in the first article of Muslim faith: There is no god but God.
12. It refers to the son of Imam, Hujjat al-Islam wal-Muslimin Haj Sayyid Ahmad Khomeini. (Eds.)
13. From Mawlawi Jalal ad-Din ar-Rumi.
14. Iranians use three calendars: the lunar Islamic calendar is used for religious occasions and is indicated by AHL/AH; for national events the Persian solar calendar is used, AHS; Gregorian calendar dates are indicated by C.E. Approximate Christian era dates will be given in brackets below dates on other calendars.

- [15.](#) The barzakh, literally means an isthmus, is the interval between the death of the individual and the general resurrection. It is mentioned in the Qur'an, (23:100): "And after them shall be a barzakh until the day they shall be raised."
- [16.](#) This refers to what God says in the Qur'an, (7:156): "My mercy embraces all things."
- [17.](#) This is the title of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah to him and to his progeny) which derives from the Qur'an, (21:107), "And We did not send you but as a mercy to the worlds."
- [18.](#) Qur'an 39:53.
- [19.](#) The chapters of the Qur'an are divided into ayat, which do not always correspond to what would be considered verses.
- [20.](#) The nafs al-*ammarah*, the commanding self, is mentioned in the Qur'an, (12:53). In *'irfan*, the way of the Muslim gnostic, it is the base self, to be contrasted with the nafs al-*lawwamah*, the reproving self, (75:2), and finally, with the nafs al-*mutma'innah*, the tranquil soul (89:27).
- [21.](#) The *Asfar al-'Arba'* is the magnum opus of Sadr ad-Din Shirazi (979–1050 AH / 1571–1640), the most important Muslim philosopher since the thirteenth century.
- [22.](#) The *Futuh al-Makkiyyah* of the great sufi theoretician, Ibn al-'Arabi (560–638 AH / 1165–1240), is an encyclopedic work projected to fill 17,000 pages in its critical edition.
- [23.](#) The *Fusus al-Hikam* of Ibn al-'Arabi, cf. fn. 1 of the introduction.
- [24.](#) This is an allusion to an expression in the Qur'an: "We will draw them on gradually whence they know not." (17:182; 68:44).
- [25.](#) From the Qur'an: 16:70 and 22:5.
- [26.](#) The Qur'anic name of the devil is used here, Iblis.
- [27.](#) Hajjaj ibn Yusuf (d. 714 C.E.) was a lieutenant appointed by the Umayyad caliph, 'Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705 C.E.). In order to suppress dissent in Mecca, he ordered the bombardment of the sacred mosque. He is famous for his bloody persecution of the Shi'ites, particularly for having killed Sa'id ibn Jubayr (d. 713 C.E.), who was one of the early exegetes of the Qur'an. It is reported that Hajjaj was tormented by the image of this martyr in his dying moments.
- [28.](#) Shafi'i (d. 820 C.E.) was the founder of one of the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence.
- [29.](#) It is reported that on a day known as *Mubahilah*, the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him and his progeny) gathered 'Ali, Fatimah, Hasan, and Husayn under his mantle and said, "Oh Lord, these are the people of my household." Imam uses the occasion of praying for the five members of his daughter-in-law's family as a reminder of the family of the Prophet.
- [30.](#) Imam Khomeini prays for the five members of the family of his daughter-in-law, and mentions that they are descendants of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah to him and his progeny) through his appointed successor, 'Ali.
- [31.](#) Shaykh Muslih ad-Din Sa'di (1184–1283) was one of the greatest Persian poets. Born in Shiraz, he studied Sufi mysticism at the Nizamiyyah madrasah at Baghdad, with Shaykh 'Abdul-Qadir al-Jilani and with Shihab ad-Din Suhrawardi. He made the pilgrimage to Mecca many times and traveled to Central Asia, India, the Seljuq territories in Anatolia, Syria, Egypt, Arabai, Yemen, Abyssinia, and Morocco. His best known works are *Bustan* (Garden) and *Golestan* (Rose-Garden), also known as *Sa'di Nameh*. The former is a collection of poems on ethical subjects, the latter a collection of moral stories in prose. He also wrote a number of odes, and collections of poems known as *Pleasantries*, *Jests* and *Obscenities*. His influence on Persian, Turkish and Indian literatures has been very considerable, and his works were often translated into European languages from the 17th century onwards. (Eds.)
- [32.](#) Literally:
If Sa'di of Shiraz is a poet,
The weavings of you and me are play.
- [33.](#) The expression *bazi dadan*, literally to give a play, is sometimes used in the sense of to deceive, cheat, or to increase the stakes of a game. Imam's usage of the term is peculiar to him.
- [34.](#) One of the names of God is al-Hamid, the Praised One. The name Ahmad, Imam Khomeini's son, the name Muhammad, and Hamid all come from the same root in Arabic. Ahmad is also used as a name of the Prophet. This sort of play on words continues through the poem. For example, Hasan and Muhsin, the Benefactor, have the same root. The children of Imam's son, Sayyid Ahmad are 'Ali, Rida (also called Yasir) and Hasan.
- [35.](#) This refers to the two grandsons of the Prophet, Hasan and Husayn.

[36.](#) The four plus eight are the twelve Imams of Shi'i Islam.

[37.](#) Here there is a pun between the words for promise, payman, and for measure, paymaneh, which indicates the cup.

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