

Safeguarding Azadari against Wrong Practices

Mustafa Hussein Tabatabai

Translated by Zainab Muhammad

Abstract

On the day of Ashura, Shi'a Muslims all over the world commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, at the Battle of Karbala, in protest against the oppressive ruler Yazid who ordered the massacre of Imam Husayn and his family members and companions given their refusal to accept Yazid's allegiance. In mourning on this day, the tradition of matam, or beating one's chest as a sign of grief for the Imam, became common. Moreover, tatbir, a more serious form of displaying one's sorrow, was also practiced, and then afterwards banned in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This article provides an analysis as to why the ban occurred using the Qur'an, hadiths, and consensus of Shi'a scholars to verify the forbiddance of this act.

The event of Karbala took place during the life of Imam Abi Abdillah, Husayn bin Ali, in which he, alongside his companions, were brutally killed and their families were taken captive. It was the biggest tragedy that has occurred in the history of Islam creating great pain and sorrow in the hearts of Muslims, especially the Shi'a.

Afterwards, the tradition of beating one's chest in grief for the Imam's martyrdom, called matam¹, came about amongst some of the Shi'as, and over the passing of time, it became one of their slogans. In recent centuries, some groups amongst the Shi'as have introduced other forms of grieving such as tatbir² which are not in line with the recommendations and rulings of Islam. This practice continued for a period of time until one of the famous Syrian jurists of the Imami³ sect rose up against the innovation of tatbir in the streets and alleyways.

This jurist was a prominent man named Allamah Syed Mohsen Amin Ameli author of 'at-Tanzeeh fi A'amal as-Shabeeh', which led to him being attacked by those who were unaware of the clear religious

rulings in this matter. In their confrontation with Allamah Ameli, they refused to engage in an intellectual debate and instead chose to stir unrest, preventing the laymen from looking into Ameli's reasons and occupying them with the same rituals of tatbir, until the official banning of it occurred with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

This article provides an analysis as to why this ban occurred with due attention to the reliable Shi'a sources. We ask God to keep us all on the path of moderation and reason. Surely He is the guardian of guidance and the right path.

Prohibition in the Quran

Hurting any part of the body through hitting it, or uncontrollable wailing during a tragedy are practices of the Era of Ignorance (Jahiliyya); both the Qur'an and the Prophet nullified these acts. Imam Sadiq said: "When the Messenger of God conquered Makkah, the people of Makkah preceded by their men came to pay allegiance to him. At this time this verse was revealed:

O Prophet! If faithful women come to you, to take the oath of allegiance to you, (pledging) that they shall not ascribe any partners to Allah, that they shall not steal, nor commit adultery, nor kill their children, nor utter any slander that they may have intentionally fabricated, nor disobey you in what is right, then accept their allegiance, and plead for them to Allah for forgiveness. Indeed Allah is all-forgiving, all-merciful.[4](#)

At this point Umm Hakeem, the daughter of Hareth ibn Hasham who was also the wife of 'Akrame the son of Abi Jahl, asked, "O Prophet of God, in regards to which act has God commanded us not to disobey you? The Prophet replied:

Never slap your cheeks, or scratch your faces, or pull your hair, or tear your collar, or blacken your clothes or wail!

It was with these conditions that the Prophet accepted their allegiance.[5](#) Imam Baqir said: "Do you know the meaning of this phrase when God said, 'Nor disobey you in what is right'?" I told him I didn't know. So he said that the Messenger of God said to Fatimah:[6](#)

When I die, do not scratch your cheeks over me, do not pull your hair, do not wail, and do not sit to lament over me. Then Abu Ja'fer, Imam Baqir said, 'This is the right which God the Almighty has commanded to.'[7](#)

Therefore, Islam forbids the hitting and slapping of one's cheeks or scratching one's face during a tragedy as the Prophet taught since he would clarify ambiguous concepts.[8](#)

With this in mind, how can one claim that the Qur'an has made tatbir permissive (mubah) since doing so is far more harmful than hitting oneself on the cheeks? Furthermore, this form of grieving is known to be

one of the practises during the Era of Ignorance.

Tatbir is not justified even when displaying one's grief of the tragedy of Karbala and to show one's love for the Ahlul Bayt. Islam is an easy and simple religion:

and has not placed before you any obstacle in the religion...[9](#)

Allah does not desire to put you to hardship.[10](#)

and He does not desire hardship for you.[11](#)

and relieves them of their burden...[12](#)

Allah desires to lighten your burden[13](#)

We did not send down to you the Quran that you should be miserable (in hardship).[14](#)

According to this, whosoever puts himself in hardship and difficulty to the extent that he slits open his head with a blade and/or injures his back using chains, and supposes that he is attaining his Lord's pleasure, without a doubt such a person is mistaken and has disobeyed his Masters' commands. God says:

O you who have faith! Do not venture ahead of Allah and His Apostle, and be wary of Allah. Indeed Allah is all-hearing, all-knowing.[15](#)

Prohibition by the Prophet

The Messenger of God followed the commands of God and the rulings sent down through revelation. It was for this reason that he openly forbade Muslims from following the ignorant customs and traditions carried out during a tragedy, and he strongly recommended them to refrain from it. Sheikh Zainuddeen[16](#) in his Musakkin al-Fuaad[17](#) has quoted the Prophet:

May God curse the woman who scratches her face (at times of grief), tears her collar and shouts out 'May I be punished' and 'May God send my death.'

He also quoted the Prophet saying,

"Any Muslim who at the time of difficulty even hits his hands on his thighs, his reward will be destructed."

Thus, the Prophet cursed those who scratch their faces and hit their thighs in grief. He also said, "The one who hits himself on the face (in times of grief) is not from us."

Therefore, how can we possibly say that tatbir and other forms of self-harm are permissible? Is this not disrespect to the law of God and His Messenger?

Prohibition by the Ahlul Bayt

Those who have recognised the true path and sincerely love the Ahlul Bayt know well that they held steadfast to the Prophet's teachings more than anyone else; they lived in accordance with his commands and prohibitions and followed his way of life. Imam Ja'far Sadiq said:

When you are faced with a hadith (from us) and you find an evidence for it in the Qur'an or the words of the Prophet then accept it, and if you do not find such, then turn the hadith back to its narrator. [18](#)

Imam Ja'far also said: "Everything should be verified with the Quran and Sunnah. [19](#) He also said, "Whoever opposes the book of God or the Sunnah of Muhammad has become a disbeliever." [20](#)

Consequently we cannot even imagine that the Ahlul Bayt would have chosen to act differently to the Prophet himself when it came to the permissible forms of lamentation. In his al-Kafi, Sheikh Kulayni narrated from Jabir when Imam Baqir was asked as to what is meant by the restlessness during grief that has been forbidden? He replied: [21](#)

The strongest forms of lamentation are: for one to cry out 'May I be punished and May God send my death,' for one to hit himself on the face, pull his hair (or shave it), or for someone to set up a lamentation. If someone is intolerant, he has chosen a path other than patience. For the one who is patient and says, '***We are from Allah and surely we will return to Him,***' [22](#) and thanks God, surely he has shown contentment with the will of God and his reward is upon God. And as for the one who does not act like this, the rule of God has been carried out on him and he deserves blame, and God will remove his reward.

Sharif al-Razi, compiler of in Nahjul Balaghah, quotes from Imam Ali:

Grant of patience (from Allah) is in proportion to the extent of the calamity you are passing through. If you exhibit fretfulness, irritation, and despair in calamities then your patience and your exertions are wasted.' [23](#)

Imam Musa Kazim said, "The one who hits his thigh at the time of calamity will lose his reward."

Consensus of the classical Imami scholars

The classical scholars of the Imami sect in following the Prophet and his family had reached a consensus that hitting one's body, scratching one's face, and recitation of absurd lamentations at times of great sadness are all prohibited acts. Sheikh Abu Ja'fer Tus in his Mabsoot writes:

To cry is not a sin, but to hit or slap one's body, scratch one's face, pull or shave one's hair, and to recite lamentations at times of despair and calamity according to the consensus of the jurists are all prohibited and void.

Muhammad ibn Idris Hilli in his *Sara'ir*, Sheikh Abu Abdullah Ameli in *Zikra* and Sheikh Muhammad Hasan Najafi in *Jawaher* hold the same view.

Tatbir: A pretext in the hands of the enemies

Until now we have spoken about the guidelines set by the Prophet, his household, and the scholars, all of whom deem hitting one's face and wailing at time of calamity as forbidden. Unfortunately, there are still people who permit such acts. They justify themselves using the following reasons:

1. Such actions in commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Husayn are a sign of reverence and respect to the slogans of religion and the Prophet's family, and in honour of this the general and ambiguous traditions become stipulated.

In response to this, it is never correct to honour and respect the Prophet and his family through means which he himself has forbidden and has considered one of the customs of the ignorant. It is as if someone were to honour the Prophet by prostrating to him²⁴ and there is no doubt that tatbir has been forbidden in Islam, so how can we give ourselves the right to honour Islam and its symbols through such acts?

Sheikh Tusi reports from Khalid bin Sodair that Imam Sadiq said: The daughters of Fatimah al-Zahra – in sorrow of Husayn bin Ali – tore their clothes and slapped their cheeks; thus, it is permissible to do so over someone like Husayn bin Ali.

The answer to this claim can be addressed from two points: First, the mentioned tradition is a weak one as Khalid ibn Sudayr – the narrator

– is unknown to the specialists in Rijal.²⁵ Allamah Mamqani in his *Tanqeeh al-Maqal* has named Khalid to be unknown to him. Ayatollah Khui states that this man cannot be relied upon due to his unknown identity. Secondly, this tradition contradicts another tradition which demotes its credibility. In the hadith narrated by Sheikh Mufid, Imam Husayn says to his sister, "I have pledged to you – and you should be loyal to my pledge – that when I am killed do not tear your collar, scratch your face, or seek your death."

Bearing this in mind, can we really claim that it was permissible for the daughters of Fatimah to act in contradiction to the will of Imam Husayn?

In addition to hadith from Khalid bin Sodair contradicting the advice given to the Lady Fatimah from her father, when the Prophet said, "When I die, do not scratch your face upon me, nor pull your hair, and do not wail or cry lamentations for me" this tradition has been narrated by the Sheikh Kulayni with a stronger and more reliable line of narrators than that of Khalid.

Sometimes opponents use the following hadith to permit tatbir: "When the Lady Zainab's eyes fell upon the severed head of her brother, she hit her face, tore her collar, and fell unconscious."

Here, they rely on Lady Zainab's reactions after the massacre on the day of Ashura; they have forgotten that before this event, when the Lady Zainab fainted when she was foretold about the martyrdom of her brother, Imam Husayn, having sprinkled water on her to awake her said, "Zainab, fear God and for His sake, be calm, and know that all of the inhabitants of the earth will die and the inhabitants of the skies will also not remain, and everything except for God will perish." It need not to be said that Imam is infallible and his words and actions hold higher credibility than others.

It could be said that Lady Zainab's emotional response were beyond her will, and that it occurred due to the impact of the calamity. Other hadiths that mentions Lady Zainab to have hit her head on a pole and blood was seen trickling from beneath her veil should also be translated as an action beyond her strength, otherwise how can it be possible that she had purposely acted against her brother's will?

- [1.](#) To beat ones chest as a sign of grief in commemoration of the brutal killing of the Imam.
- [2.](#) Tatbir: the Arabic term used for a ritual in which the individual strikes his/her head with a sword or knife until blood flows. The Persian term for this act is Qame Zani.
- [3.](#) A sect from among the Muslims who believe in the existence of twelve leaders after the Prophet Muhammad.
- [4.](#) Sheikh Kulayni in his hadith compilation, al-Kafi.
- [5.](#) Furu' Kafi, Book of Nikah, vol. 5, p. 527, Tehran.
- [6.](#) Sheikh Kulayni in another document from Umar bin Maqdam narrated that he heard Imam Baqir saying
- [7.](#) Furu' Kafi, Book of Nikah, vol. 5, p. 527, Tehran.
- [8.](#) such as the phrase mentioned above, that they will not Disobey you in acting according to The Right.
- [9.](#) Hajj 22:78
- [10.](#) Maedah 5:6
- [11.](#) Baqarah 2:185
- [12.](#) A'araf 7:157
- [13.](#) Nisa 4:28
- [14.](#) TaHa 20:2
- [15.](#) Hujarat 49:1
- [16.](#) Shaheed al-Thani (Second Martyr)
- [17.](#) p. 108
- [18.](#) Usul al-Kafi, vol. 1, p. 69, Tehran
- [19.](#) Life and teachings of the Prophet.
- [20.](#) Usul al-Kafi, vol. 1, p. 70.
- [21.](#) Al-Furu' min al-Kafi, book of al-Jana'ez, vol. 3, p. 222, similarly; al-Furu' min al-Kafi, vol. 3, p. 223
- [22.](#) Baqarah 2:156
- [23.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Saying no. 143
- [24.](#) Bearing in mind that prostration to any other than God is forbidden in Islam.
- [25.](#) A science in which the narrators of hadith are investigated.

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