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Sheikh Mansour Leghaei

Introduction

In the Name of God; the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful

Imam Ali, the leader of the believers, is the epitome of justice, bravery and piety. The history of Islam is bound to his great personality and honorable existence. He is on the high peak of the Right Path and is the Imam and leader only of those who are on the same path even on a very low level. Only those who look at the lifestyle of Imam Ali (a.s) and attempt at getting closer to him in practice can really and truly claim that they regard him as their Imam.

We, the Shia Muslims always consider Imam Ali (a.s) our Imam and claim that we are his followers. Thus, we are celebrating his birth this evening.

The question is, is there any criteria to be met by which we can hope that we are following Imam Ali (a.s) and that he is our Imam, or is it just enough to say we are born Shia and love him, irrespective of any similarities between our lifestyle and that of his? There is a sheikh who leads the congregational prayer in a certain mosque that I never go to. Can I claim that he is my imam of Jama'at although I never stay behind him in praying?!

This lecture aims at introducing some of the main characteristics of Imam Ali (a.s). As we will see after the Prophet of Islam (s.a.w.w) he enjoyed the highest of those virtues and hence, is he indeed the Imam and the unique leading figure of those personalities. He is on the high peak of the Right Path and is the Imam and leader only of those who are on the same path even on a very low level. Only those who look at the lifestyle of Imam Ali (a.s) and attempt at getting closer to him in practice can really and truly claim that they regard him as their Imam.

Before introducing the characteristics of Imam Ali (a.s) I shall share with you the meaning of 'Imam' and why do the Shia follow Imam Ali (a.s).

Who is an Imam?

'Imam' literally means leader, chief, guide and standard. An 'Imam' is the one that people adhere to and follow his words or actions. The term 'imam' in the language of the Quran does not necessarily carry a holy and respectful meaning. It is a title for specific elite who have a leading position in their communities

be it a positive and righteous leadership or a negative and destructive one. Thus, the Almighty God appointed Prophet Ibrahim (a.s) an 'imam' for people (2:124), and also commanded Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.w) and his companions to fight back the 'imams of Kufr' (the leading figures of the infidels) who violated their oaths after their covenant and attacked the religion of Islam. (9:120)

Imam Ali (a.s) is a leader who was appointed by Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.w) through revelation. Therefore, he is a righteous leader, following his leadership and guidance would lead to true Sunna of the Prophet of Islam which leads to Paradise.

Do Shia follow Imam Ali (p) rather than Prophet Muhammad

(P)?!

Sometimes people wonder why is it that the Shia consider themselves the followers of Imam Ali (a.s)? Are we not supposed to follow the guidance of the Prophet of Islam? Do they follow Imam Ali rather than following the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad?!

The answer is that both Shia and Sunni Muslims claim they are following the guidelines and the teachings revealed to the Prophet of Islam. However, after the demise of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his pure progeny) two main schools of thought emerged in introducing Islam to the next generations; i.e. The School of Kholafa (known as Sunnis), and the School of Ahlul-Bait (known as Shiites).

The Shia believe that following the words and actions of Imam Ali (a.s) and the other 11 Imams of Ahlul-Bayt (a.s) leads to the actual teachings of the Prophet of Islam. Therefore, when they say they are the Shia of Imam Ali (a.s) they mean they are the followers of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.w) through the path of his best student; Imam Ali (peace be upon him)

A rabbi visited Imam Ali (a.s) and asked: "When did your Lord come into existence?! The Imam replied: "When He did not exist to say when did He exist? My Lord was before 'Before' without any 'before' and after any 'After' without 'after' and there is no end or limit to His goal. All limits end with Him and He is the end of all limits."

The astonished rabbi said: "Are you a prophet?!" the Imam replied: "Woe unto you! Indeed, I am one of the slaves of Muhammad (s.a.w.w)." ¹

Imam Ali (a.s); Whose Imam is He?

1. Imamul-Mo'meneen (The Imam of the believers)

Imam Ali (a.s) is the first Imam and the leading figure of all believing Muslims. Historically it is an indisputable fact that he was the very first person who believed in Islam. The Imam himself expressing

this fact says; “None preceded me except Ahmad.”. [2](#)

Ahmad ibn Hanbal; the Imam of the Hanbali School of jurisprudence narrated in his book from Iyas ibn Afif from his father: “I was a trader before Islam. Once I went for the Hajj ceremony to Mecca and stayed with my business counterpart; Abbas ibn Mottalib. One day as we were negotiating on a deal, a man came out of his room, looked up at the sun in the sky and as soon as the sun inclined towards west he began praying. Immediately after that a woman and a young boy came out and joined him in prayer.

I asked Abbas who they were, and he said: The man is Muhammad ibn Abdullah my nephew, and she is his wife; Khadijah daughter of Khowaylad and the young boy is Ali ibn Abi Taleb; his cousin.

I asked what they were doing, and he said: “They are praying, and he thinks that he is a prophet whilst no one follows him other than these two. He also claims that one day the treasury of Kesra and Caesar will be opened to him.”[3](#)

We must however remember that when we say Imam Ali (a.s) was the first who believed in Islam, we do not mean before that time he did not believe in God or as if prior to that he was an idolater! Imam Ali (a.s) never in his entire life worshipped other than one God and thus Sunni Muslims admire him by praying for him, “May God honor his face’. This tribute is used only for him expressing the fact that his face was honored by God as unlike many others he never prostrated himself before any idol. Therefore, when we say Ali was the first Muslim it is in the same context as when Prophet Ibrahim (a.s) said:

“And I am the first of the Muslims.” [6: 163]

or when the holy Quran says;

“The Messenger believed in what was revealed to him from his Lord.” [2:285]

Thus, Imam Ali (a.s) is only the Imam and the leader of those who have faith in God and believe in the message of the Prophet of Islam (s.a.w.w). Those who do not believe in Islam in any form or shape cannot claim that he is their leader.

2. Imamul-Mosallin (The Leader of those who pray):

As mentioned in the previous paragraph Imam Ali was the first who prayed with the Messenger of God. Similarly, the history of Islam has not presented anyone after the Prophet of Islam (s.a.w.w) worshipping the Almighty God more or better than Imam Ali (a.s).

Ibn Abil-Hadid asserted: “Imam Ali (a.s) was the most worshipping of all Muslims. He prayed to God and fasted for His sake more than anyone else. In fact, people learned the Night Prayer from him.”[4](#)

His Salat: Prophetic Salat

Al-Bokhari narrated: Motraf ibn Abdullah said: “Omran ibn Hosayn and I prayed behind Ali ibn Abi Talib. When he was going for prostration he was reciting ‘Allahu-Akbar’ and when he was sitting up from prostration he was also reciting ‘Allahu-Akbar’. When we finished the prayer, Omran grabbed my hand and either said to me: ‘His prayer reminded me of the Prophet’s prayer’, or he may have said: ‘He offered a Prophetic prayer.’”⁵

His Punctuality to the Times of Salat

The Muslim daily prayers have set and fixed times. Muslims are bound to observe the time of each prayer and offer them in their first possible times. The Almighty God says in the Quran:

“The prayer is enjoined on the believers at fixed hours.” [4: 103]

Imam Sadiq (a.s) said: “Every time Imam Ali used to stand up for Salat, the colour of his face would change so much that it would be obvious. Imam Ali (a.s) was asked about the reason behind it. He answered: “The time of ‘the Trust that God offered to the heavens and the earth and the mountains and they declined to bear it and were afraid of it, but man bore it’ has arrived and I am not sure if I would appropriately deliver the Trust or not?”⁶

In the middle of the hardship of the battle of Seffin as Imam Ali (a.s) was fighting he was glancing at the sun in the sky too. Ibn Abbas; one of the commanders of his army, noticed and asked what the Imam was looking at in the sky? Imam Ali (a.s) replied: “I am watching the entering time of al-Salat.” Ibn Abbas with a big surprise replied: “Now! In the middle of the war?!” Imam Ali (a.s) calmly said: “What other than Salat are we fighting them for?!”⁷

Having read the above examples can you begin to contemplate that a group of people hold a celebration for the birthday of Imam Ali (a.s), yet there is no Salat included in their program?! Or some of them are too busy in preparation of food that they miss the congregational prayer?! Can they truly regard Imam Ali (a.s) their Imam?!

His Presence of Heart in Salat

The presence of heart means that the heart and attention of the one who offers his prayer is with God during the pray. The presence of heart is more profound than mere attending the meaning of the words of Salat although this may be a good start to reach the presence of heart.

Two she-camels were gifted to the Messenger of God. One was fatter than the other but the other was bigger.

The Messenger of God announced to his companions that whoever can offer two Rak’at prayers during which he does not think of any worldly affairs, he would gift one of the she-camels to him. No one

nominated himself even after the Prophet repeated his offer three times. Imam Ali (a.s) stood up and said: "I will do that, O Messenger of God. From the time I recite Allahu-Akbar until when I say my last Tasleem I think of nothing other than God."

The Prophet of Islam (s.a.w.w) asked him to get ready and offer a two Rak`at prayer under the supervision of the Prophet.

The challenge began and as soon as Imam Ali (a.s) finished his Salat, the Archangel Gabriel descended to the Prophet and said: "O Muhammad! Allah greets you and says: give one of the two camels to Ali!"

The Prophet said: the condition was that he does not think of other than God, but in his Tashahhud, he thought of which one of the camels he should ask for?!

Gabriel said: O Muhammad! Indeed, God greets you and says: Ali was thinking which one would be better for charity. Thus, his thought was for the sake of God not for a worldly pleasure.

The Messenger of God gifted both she-camels to Ali whilst he had tears in his eyes. Upon that an Ayah was revealed to him:

"Verily, therein is indeed a reminder for him who has a heart or gives ear while he is heedful."

50:37[8](#)

The degree of Imam Ali's presence of heart was so high and strong that in one of the battles a piece of an arrow had remained in his foot. Having no anesthetic drugs, to remove the piece would have been too painful and to leave the piece in his body would cause the wound to become infected and would also affect his mobility.

Fatima al-Zahra (s.a); his wife suggested that the piece of stick be removed from his foot whilst he was praying, as the Imam would not be conscious of his body. The operation was a success whilst he was in prostration![9](#)

His Extra Attention to the Night Prayer

The Night Prayer is a virtue but not an obligation unless for the Prophet of Islam himself. However, Imam Ali (a.s) said: "Since I heard the Prophet saying: 'Night Prayer is light, I never left the Night Prayer'.

Ibnil-kawwa' said: Even on the Night of al-Harir? The Imam said: Yes, even on the Night of al-Harir." [10](#)

His Abundance in Salat

Imam Baqir (a.s) said: "No one would tolerate the amount of worshipping that Imam Ali (a.s) was offering even Imam Zainul Abideen." [11](#) (Who is known as the Imam of those who Prostrate themselves for Allah)

It is also narrated from Imam Sadiq (a.s): "Ali (a.s) towards the end of his life used to offer one thousand Rak`at in every 24 hours." [12](#)

3. Imamul- Najin (The Imam of the Whisperers to God)

Supplication, invocation and communication with God depend directly on the level of people's knowledge and trust in God. The more one knows about God the more the person communicate with Him and approaches Him in his needs. From the Islamic point of view, it is recommended that any Muslim organizes his days into three portions;

1. For communication with his Lord
2. For his livelihood
3. Halal and permissible pleasures.

It is narrated from Imam Sadiq (a.s), "Ameerul Mo'mineen was a man who used to whisper a lot to God through supplications." [13](#)

Several years after the martyrdom of Imam Ali (a.s), Dherar ibn Dhamrah arrived at Moawiyah. Having seen one of the companions of Imam Ali (a.s) Moawiah asked Dherar to describe Imam Ali (a.s) to him. Dherar requested that Moawiah excuse him on that but Moawiah insisted. Finally, Dherar opened his mouth and described his most beloved Imam. Part of his description reads, "I swear to God that one night I saw Imam Ali on his prayer mat holding his beard and moaning in tears like the one that a snake has bitten, as if the echo of his voice is still in my ears saying; "O my Lord. O my Lord. Addressing the pleasure of this world he was saying; 'You want to deceive me! Are you trying to encourage me to yourself? How impossible! How impossible! You may deceive other than me. I have divorced you three times. How short your life is? How low your position is? How easy you can put one into danger. Ahhhh. Ahhhh. Because our provision is so little, and the journey is so long and the path is so lonely."

As Dherar was narrating the holy words of the Imam, Moawiah along with his councilmen were all in tears wiping his tears with the comb of his attire. He then said, "Indeed Abul Hassan (the father of Hassan) was like this. O Dherar! how is your life without him? Dherar with a deep sorrow said: "Like the life of the one whose most beloved one is beheaded at his bosom whose tears have no end and his grief cannot be eased. He then stood up and left." [14](#)

The supplications of Imam Ali (a.s) are so many that books have been compiled as a collection of his supplications. [15](#) For nearly every occasion there is a supplication narrated from Imam Ali (a.s), such as the famous Doa' Kumail, Munajaat Sha'baniyah and numerous other supplications. There are even specific supplications narrated from Imam Ali to be recited at the time of entering Salat, the wearing of your clothes, sleeping, waking up, eating, drinking etc.

4. Imamul Hakimeen (The Imam of the Rulers)

Political and high position in society is a rank that many wishes to have. How many mischievous plots and deceits many people may commit to achieve a political position. Campaign elections of the candidates of the presidency or even as simple as being a counselor of a local council are examples that

we observe in our day to day transactions. Following the Machiavellian political philosophy of 'the end justifies the means' they involve themselves in any type of deceit and fraud and give false promises just to gain a mere seat.

Political position and the ruling of subjects were less valuable for Imam Ali (a.s) than the sneezing of a goat (*Nahjul Balagha* Sermon 3) or a worn pair of shoes unless the position will enable him to bring to ease the oppressed or implement social justice.

Ibn Abbas narrated: "I saw Ali ibn Abi Talib sitting and repairing his shoes. I said, 'It is better you spend your time on repairing the social affairs.' He ignored me until he finished with his shoes and then asked me how much the value of his pair of shoes was. I said that it had no value. He insisted that I may price it as it was. I said: "Well! A fraction of a dirham"! Imam Ali then said: "By Allah, this pair of shoes is more favorable to me than leading your political affairs unless I can stand a right and diminish a falsehood!"¹⁶

It was in the Land & Environment Court of New South Wales that I heard for the first time that a solicitor was addressing the judge: 'Your Honor!' I was then wondering if the 'honor' was really to the judge or his position. Would he be still honored if he had retired?! What we usually don't realize is that the honor and respect that people offer to us is metaphoric, it is in fact, the position that they honor not the person. Thus, once we lack the position the so-called honor also disappears. There are however few exceptions in history.

Abdullah son of Ahmad ibn Hanbal (the Imam of Hanbalis) said: "One day I was sitting with my father where a group of people were discussing the Caliphate of Abu-Bak, Omar, Othman and Ali. When my father noticed that their conversation was taking long he turned around said: "Indeed, the caliphate did not give any honor to Imam Ali, rather he honored the position of caliphate."¹⁷

Indeed, such was the position for Imam Ali (a.s) as Sir William Muir said: "It was rather thrust upon him than sought."¹⁸

During his leadership he was informed that the army of Moawiah had invaded a village and seized the ornaments of a Jewish lady. He felt so grieved and anguished with the news that he said: "If any Muslim dies of grief after all this he is not to be blamed but rather there is justification for him before me."¹⁹

Imam Ali (a.s) as the head of the then vast Islamic country. Nevertheless, he went to the market with his servant Qanbar to buy two shirts, one for himself and one for his servant. He bought the shirts but gave the more elegant and expensive one to Qanbar and kept the simpler one for himself. When Qanbar surprisingly complained that he was a leader and it would be more suitable for him to wear the more elegant one, Imam Ali (a.s) replied: "But you are younger and it's more becoming on you and I can manage with the one I have chosen."

Where on earth can humanity find such leaders? The Muslim Shia has such an exceptional role model and unless they live on that line they cannot reclaim that Imam Ali (a.s) is their Imam.

His judicial system was one of the most just in existence. Thus, all citizens irrespective of their background felt safe to call to the court whoever they had a complaint about. The story of Imam Ali (a.s) as the leader of the country and a Jewish subject on the issue of the stolen armor is well known. To cut a long story short, Imam Ali (a.s) was so just during his political leadership that he is titled by even non-Muslim historians "The Voice of Human Justice." Others have regarded his justice the actual cause of his martyrdom as tyrants and mischief makers could not tolerate and live with his justice.

5. Imamul Mutasadiqeen (The Imam of the Charity Givers)

Man's duty in Islam is twofold. One in relation to him and his Lord; the Almighty God in the sense of worshipping and other rituals, and the other in relation to his fellow humans and creatures around him.

The examples of Imam Ali's generous and sincere charity giving are more than what I can mention in this brief lecture. Ayah 12 in Surah al-Mojadalah (58) in the Quran is solely practiced by Imam Ali (a.s). Also, he is the unique example of the one who gave charity whilst he was bowing in Raku' about which Ayah 55 of Surah al-Ma'edah (5) is revealed. Ayah 5 to 22 of Surah al-Ensan (76) revealed to the Prophet of Islam (s.a.w.w) to eternally mark the most sincere and generous donation of Imam Ali (a.s) and his family.

Unlike nearly all people whose wish in their life is to extend their wealth and investments Imam Ali's wish was to increase his ongoing charity. Ahmad ibn Hanbal narrated from Imam Ali (a.s): "At the time of the Prophet of Islam, I was starving so much that I had to firmly wrap my stomach with a stone but today thanks to God I can give forty thousand (dirham) for charity."^{[20](#)}

Imam Sadiq (a.s) describing the amount of charity that Imam Ali (a.s) used to give says: "By Allah, Ameerul Mo'mineen purchased one thousand slaves and freed them for the sake of God and to be able to afford it he worked even till his hands were badly worn and wounded."^{[21](#)}

The aspects of the leadership of Imam Ali (a.s) and his role-model characters are not limited to the above-mentioned points. He is undoubtedly the Imam of al-Mottaqin (the pious people), the Imam of al-Zahedin (those not desirous for worldly pleasures), the Imam of al-Mowahhedin (monotheists), the Imam of al-Fosaha' (the eloquent), etc.

^{[1](#)}. Al-Kaafi vol. 1 p.89

^{[2](#)}. Al-Kaafi, vol. 1 p. 198

^{[3](#)}. Al-Mosnad vol. 1 p.448

^{[4](#)}. Sharh Nahjul-Balagha, vol. 1 p.27

^{[5](#)}. Sahih al-Bokhari, vol. 1 p.272

^{[6](#)}. Ibn Shahr Ashoob; al-Manaqib, vol.2 p. 124 and Imam's statement refers to the Ayah 72 of Chapter 33 of the Quran.

^{[7](#)}. Beharul-Anwaar vol.83 p.23

^{[8](#)}. Ibid, vol.36 p. 161

^{[9](#)}. Kashani, al-Mahajatul-Baydaa', vol. 1 p.397

^{[10](#)}. Ibn Shahr Ashoob; al-Manaqib vol.2 p. 123. the Night of al-Harir is the night during the battle of Seffin in which it is said

that more than 70,000 people were killed.

[11.](#) Al Kaafi vol.8,p. 130

[12.](#) ibid. vol.4p154

[13.](#) ibid.vol.2,p.468

[14.](#) al-Isti'aab, vol. 3 p.209

[15.](#) For instance, see 'al-Adiye al-Alawiyyah' by Seyyed Hashim Rasooli Mahalati in which he has complied about 150 supplications of Imam Ali (a.s).

[16.](#) al-Irshaad vol.1 p.247 and similar story is mentioned in Nahjul-Balagha, Sermon 33

[17.](#) Mosoo'atul-Imam Ali, vol.8 p.409

[18.](#) The Life of Mahomet, London 1877, p.250

[19.](#) Nahjul-Balagha, Sermon 27

[20.](#) al-Mosnad vol. 1 p.334

[21.](#) al-Kaafi vol.8 p.165

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