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Lesson Eleven: The Beginning of Migration

As a result of the oppressive atmosphere in Mecca and the unbridled persecution of the Muslims that threatened them constantly with imprisonment, torture and death, and in recognition of the fact that the Muslim warriors were not yet ready for battle, the command was given to migrate. The Prophet gave instructions that the Muslims leave the city one by one and proceed to Yathrib.

The Quraysh understood well the danger this represented, and they stooped to all kinds of illicit means to prevent the Companions of the Prophet from departing, even taking their wives hostage. But true to their original decision, the Muslims began gradually to leave the center of polytheism, ignorance and oppression, leaving behind their attachments and their families in order to migrate. The people of Yathrib took them into their embrace.

Most of the Muslims had left, and Mecca was almost empty.

This unusual situation and the disquieting news arriving from Medina greatly worried the Quraysh. Since the previous ill conduct of the leaders of unbelief and rejection had not yielded any results, they arrived at a grave and perilous decision: they planned to kill the Prophet. It was agreed that as soon as night fell, the designated assassins should go about their work. 1

They surrounded the house of the Prophet at night, waiting in front of the door for the Prophet to emerge at dawn. They kept his room under surveillance throughout the night and were convinced that the son of Abdullah, who had not a single protector in the city, would be unable to escape their siege of his house and that his fate would be sealed at dawn.

However, the Messenger of God ordered ‘Ali, upon whom be peace, to sleep in his bed – ‘Ali whose very spirit had been formed in Islam and who thought nothing of dying for the sake of God and the life of the Prophet. The Prophet then left the house secretly, in the company of Abu Bakr.

At this point a man chanced by the house and asked those who were thirsting for the blood of the Messenger of God whom they were waiting for. When they replied, "Muhammad," he told them, "he has

escaped your grasp." When dawn rended the breast of the horizons, they were astonished to see ‘Ali, upon whom be peace, rise up from the bed of the Prophet.

It is not quite clear how the Prophet managed to break through the circle that had been thrown round his house without arousing attention. What is certain is that God had willed to deliver His chosen Messenger from the grasp of those vile and lowly persons.

The Prophet left Mecca in the heart of the night and took refuge in a cave, and then continued on to Medina using back roads. Once he reached the city, it was clear that the treacherous plan of the Quraysh had ultimately harmed them and benefited Islam and the Muslims. The powerful hand that had protected the burning torch of Islam for thirteen years against all harm was able with ease to bring this conspiracy to naught.

Before the migration of the Prophet, a number of citizens of Medina had come to Mecca to seek the support of the Quraysh in the tribal wars that for years had pitted the Aws against the Khazraj. Despite the warnings of the Quraysh, they had listened to the words of the Prophet, upon whom be peace, and had been deeply affected, even transformed, by them. The next time that they came to Mecca in order to perform the pilgrimage, they had formally accepted the summons of the Messenger of God and embraced Islam. After leaving Mecca and returning to their native city, they expended great efforts to enlighten the people of Yathrib and convey the Divine message to all classes of the population. This represented in itself a massive blow to the foundations of idolatry.

The people of Medina were exhausted by the long tribal wars, and they saw in the call of the Messenger a message of hope and a means of deliverance from the consuming fire of civil strife. In order to appreciate the need of society at that time for the great movement of Islam and to grasp the role played by Islam in putting an end to corruption and misguidance, we must understand the situation prevailing in the Arabian Peninsula.

‘Ali, upon whom be peace, said: "God sent Muhammad, upon whom be peace and blessings, to warn people away from the path in which they were engaged, and He appointed him trustee of His heavenly decrees. At that time, O Arabs, you aware following the worst of beliefs and customs, and you lived in the most deprived of all lands. You slept in the midst of rough stones and poisonous snakes, drank foul water, ate no proper food, split each other's blood, and disregarded the ties of kinship. There were idols among you, and sin had rendered you impotent." [2]

The migration of the Most Noble Messenger to Medina, which marked the beginning of the Islamic era, was the start of a new chapter in the history of Islam. Thereafter blows rained down continuously on the forces of corruption and falsehood.

The Prophet's cause took root in Medina. His call went from house to house, and a new society crystallized. The powerful logic and creativity of the ideas set forth by Muhammad, upon whom be peace and blessings, were such that the previous cultural, moral and social structures of the people of Medina

thoroughly collapsed, together with all the customs that dominated their lives.

The chains of slavery and the fetters of cruelty and oppression were torn asunder; the powerful were pulled down from their thrones of arrogance. The immortal shari'a brought by the Prophet to mankind as a gift of new norms of justice and elevated culture, and Medina became swiftly transformed into a religious, social and military base for the Islamic cause.

The experiences they had gone through in Mecca, the continued harassment and torture of the believers, the sundering of old ties and the forging of new ones, the continuous deepening of spiritual maturity – all this contributed to the development of the migrants, so that just as Medina became a center of spiritual and political power for the whole of Arabia, it too became a base for the ultimate diffusion of Islam throughout the world.

It was from there that the Prophet of Islam presented his message to the nations of the world. He summoned all human beings to unite beneath the banner of monotheism and its vital, life-giving teachings, so that in less than half a century the religion he had founded brought under its sway the great and prosperous nations of that day. It fell like a rain of mercy and blessing on souls and hearts that were anxious to receive it.

Those who fail to grasp the profound causes of events attribute the swift progress and diffusion of Islam to mere chance. In fact, none of the major events of the world can be attributed to chance, and this is especially true of the emergence of the founder of an ethical, philosophical and legal system.

Can it have been a matter of pure accident that the spark of such a phenomenon should have appeared but once in the history of Arabia, without anything similar occurring there ever again.

If certain sociological factors caused the emergence in Arabia of such a vast movement, why should another hero comparable to the Prophet not have arisen in the same area, because of the same factors? Why should this one particular event stand forth from all others, as a unique and self-contained instance?

If a revolutionary movement occurs in a given society as the product of certain social conditions, it is impossible that it should happen suddenly, without any precedent or connection to prior developments. On the contrary, it is like a wave that gradually expands, until the conditions become fully ripe for the emergence of a leader.

When propagating his message, the Prophet of Islam did not represent the latest in a chain of ideological movements such as occur in every society. No groundwork had been laid, in the environment where he grew up, for the lofty concepts, values and ideas that he presented nor did any foundation exist on which he might have built.

The revolutionary wave of Islam derived its force exclusively from the being of the Prophet; it came

about without any preliminary. It was not a question of the revolutionary movement, comprising the Companions of the Prophet, serving as a nucleus around which the message grew; on the contrary, that movement was itself an extension of the person of the Prophet. The movement was a part of his person; his person was not part of the movement. From this point of view, the revolutionary movement of the Prophet of Islam is utterly different from all other movements in history.

In Islam, we encounter a comprehensive, all-embracing movement that concerns itself with all aspects of life, for it represents a profound revolution in all human values and concepts. The teachings of Islam shook the very foundations of tribal society, and so vast and lofty was the Islamic ideal that it conceived the idea of a world society, bringing together all human beings under the banner of monotheism.

It is useful to hear these facts as others have expounded them. Nehru, for example, the well-known Indian statesman, writes as follows: "It is strange that this Arab race, which for long ages had lived a sleepy existence, apparently cut off from what was happening elsewhere, should suddenly wake up and show such tremendous energy as to startle and upset the world. The story of the Arabs, and of how they spread rapidly over Asia, Europe and Africa, and of the high culture and civilization which they developed, is one of the wonders of history.

Islam was the new force or idea which woke up the Arabs and filled them with self-confidence and energy. This was a religion started by a new Prophet, Muhammad. Within seven years of the flight, Muhammad returned to Mecca as its master. Even before this he sent out from Medina a summons to the kings and rulers of the world to acknowledge the one God and his Prophet. Heraclius, the Constantinople Emperor, got it while he was still engaged in his campaign against the Persians in Syria; the Persian King got it; and it is said that even Tai-Tsung got it in China.

They must have wondered, these kings and rulers, who this unknown person was who dared to command them! From the sending of these messages we can form some idea of the supreme confidence in himself and his mission which Muhammad must have had. And this confidence and faith he managed to give to this people, and with this to inspire and console them, this desert people of no great consequence managed to conquer half the known world.

"Confidence and faith in themselves were a great thing. Islam also gave them a message of brotherhood - of the equality of all those who were Muslims. A measure of democracy was thus placed before the people. Compared to the corrupt Christianity of the day, this message of brotherhood must have had a great appeal, not only for the Arabs, but also for the inhabitants of many countries where they went." [3]

This profound and amazing transformation in human history was originated with one man acting entirely alone. He had no material resources at his command, had never engaged in scientific or technical study, and had never even taken anything from the learning of others. This cannot be regarded as a natural or normal occurrence; it is, on the contrary, eloquent testimony to the superhuman capacities of that outstanding personality.

Were his enemies in Arabia not to have engaged him in internal wars, he would have summoned other peoples to Islam more swiftly and energetically. But the unrelenting attacks of his enemies compelled him to devote the major part of his time and resources to the defense of Islam.

An Answer to the Opponents of Islam

Opponents of Islam make the criticism that Islam relied on military force in order to secure its progress. However, we see that the Prophet never initiated hostilities against any group or people, whether it be the Jews or the Quraysh or the Byzantines. History bears witness that all the wars waged by the Most Noble Messenger, upon whom be peace and blessings, were defensive in nature: the purpose was always to respond to the attacks of the enemy, with the exception of certain cases where the Muslim were convinced that the enemy would persist in its aggressiveness and treachery and were correspondingly ordered to take the initiative in defending themselves.

In the following verses from the Qur'an, the initial reason for legislating jihad – i.e. responding to the attacks of an aggressive enemy – is clearly laid forth:

"Permission is given to the warriors of Islam to fight against their enemies, for they have suffered oppression at their hands. God is able to aid them, and they are people who have been expelled from their homeland without due reason. Their crime was this, that they said, "God is our Lord." (***22:39-40***)

"Fight in the way of God against those who do battle with you, but be careful not to transgress the bounds, for God loves not the transgressors." (***2:190***)

"They break their oath after concluding a treaty and vilify your religion, fight against the leaders of the unbelievers, for they observe no pledge or treaty; only then may they cease their violations." (***9:12***)

Were the Muslims carrying weapons at the very dawn of Islam when the polytheists began turning to Islam in droves? Did the Muslims start a war in order to diffuse and propagate the religion of God? Everyone knows that in the very beginning, far from attacking any group or nation, the Muslims were themselves the victims of aggression.

Moreover, if it be supposed that the early Muslims embraced Islam without understanding its veracity, later generations were under no compulsion to follow them; it was the profundity of the Divine teachings that elicited their belief, in accordance with love, willingness and free choice.

If we assumed that Islam was imposed on people through coercion and threats, a corollary of this assumption would be that conversion to Islam was compulsory wherever Islam was strong. We see, however, that Islam gave human beings the choice of either accepting Islam or simply assenting to its governmental institutions while retaining their own religion. If Islam did not respect freedom of opinion, it

would never have provided for the second possibility. Islam never took advantage of its position of strength to force people to accept the religion of God.

Apart from all this, faith and belief are a matter of the heart; they can never come into being without an inward inclination on the part of the human being, purely through the exercise of compulsion and force. In order to change the beliefs and ideas of people, instruction, teaching, deduction and logic are called for; force and coercion can never remove beliefs that have taken root in people's minds.

Islam had a recourse to military force and began an armed struggle at a time when people had been deprived of freedom of thought and denied the opportunity to choose the correct path. Islam issued its proclamation of war in order to defeat the oppressive tyrants who were preventing the Islamic call from being preached freely and to put an end to the stifling of thought. Only then would the masses of humanity be able, in an atmosphere of liberty to choose with absolute freedom a correct path in life. If Islam had not acted thus, truth would have been stifled in the cradle.

In order for the religion which has human happiness as its aim and wishes to reform all of human affairs to reach its lofty goals, and in order for those persons who have the capacity to learn and assimilate the teachings of that religion to come into contact with it, without encountering any obstacle, a position of dominance must be attained. It is obvious, moreover, that power can be defeated only by power.

In order to destroy the forces that were standing in the path of the diffusion of the light of truth and were fighting against the formation and development of sound and exalted modes of thought, does any path exist save confrontation and battle against the agents of corruption?

The obstinate chiefs of the Quraysh wished to exploit the ignorance and weakness of the people, to continue ruling over their lives, their property and their honor, and to preserve forever the customs of ignorance that underlie their hereditary rule. They could not tolerate the influence, still less the prevalence, of a religion that was seizing them by the throat and dragging them down from their thrones of arrogance and self-worship. They understood well that the spread of Islam would utterly destroy their ancient, rotting customs and all their pomp and splendor.

Hence they rose up with all their beings to fight against this religion and the laws it was bringing, in a struggle the purpose of which was the defense of their ancestral customs and traditions and their hereditary lordship and rule.

Was it possible for Islam to respond to such ideas and motivations purely with logic and proof? If a certain group of people tries to place a government in difficulty, drawing the sword and lighting fires everywhere, can the government in question save itself without resort to military force? How else can it defeat the miscreants? Thus the Qur'an says:

"Fight against them until disorder is brought to an end and the religion of God is established. If they cease causing disorder, do not fight against them." (***2:193***).

No one can deny that in such cases it is a necessary final resort to take up weapons, because disorder, corruption, and violence will end only when the glint of the sword flashes and the hands of the miscreants are severed

Islam is not, then, a religion of violence and war, nor was the Prophet of God one who sought to destroy the enemy in battle despite the availability of other means. At a time when the Muslims were being harassed and tortured by the polytheists in Mecca for the crime of having accepted Islam, a Divine command entrusted them with the duty of delivering the oppressed masses from the grasp of cruel tyrants and cleansing the surrounding area of all forms of slavery and domination, by recourse to military force.

Only thus could the newly emergent Islamic society continue to grow and develop in freedom. The Qur'an says:

"Why do you not rise up in jihad in the path of God and for the sake of delivering the oppressed ? A group of men, women and children in Mecca are prisoners to the cruelty of the unjust, and they say: 'O Lord, deliver us from this realm of the oppressors and set us free, and send us one who will lead us and aid us.'" (***4:75***)

The battle implied here is one waged against oppressors who are fighting against God, freely indulging in the oppression of mankind, and depriving human beings of their share of the justice and luminosity that is contained in God's religion.

This is in contrast to the wars waged by the conquerors known to us from history, of whom it certainly cannot be said that they were fighting for the sake of justice, equal human rights and happiness for the whole of mankind!

If the people sought to defend its life and dignity and refused to accept humiliation, did not these world-conquering warriors become infuriated and order massacres and plundering to take place? Did Muhammad, upon whom be peace and blessings, have an aim similar to theirs?

Did he engage in bloodshed to satisfy his own whims so that men would bow reverentially before his splendor and might and he might seize their property for his own use? Did not their conquests augment their arrogance and self-worship, and did they not use the booty of war to enhance the opulence of their rule? However ignorant and unjust a person might be, no one can attribute any of this to the Prophet of Islam.

The war waged by Muhammad, upon whom be peace and blessings, was a war of monotheism against polytheism. It was a struggle of light against darkness, and represented the last resort for the destruction of misguidance and the diffusion of virtue and justice. He was a reformer devoted to advancing the true life of the human being and he progressed unceasingly toward that lofty goal.

When the Prophet first proclaimed his mission, all the Arab tribes were prepared to submit to his rule and assign him all kinds of privilege, but he decisively rejected their proposals. He wished to unite the masses of mankind beneath the banner of virtue and Divine unity, to establish the government of reason and piety, and to guide mankind on the path to eternal felicity.

Today, after the passage of more than fourteen centuries, the triumph of the Prophet is fully apparent. The book that he brought, which includes within it the essence of all heavenly scriptures, guarantees the happiness of mankind, and the noble name of this lofty personage is reverentially mentioned by millions of human beings. His name resounds from all the minarets in the world with a great spiritual splendor, and it will always continue to do so, morning and evening, in accordance with a Divine promise, penetrating the souls of men and illumining their hearts. For God said in the Qur'an:

"We have elevated and borne on high your goodly name." (***94:4***)

1. Sirat ibn Hisham, Volume I, page 480.
2. Nahj al-Balagha, ed. Fayz, page 83.
3. Jawaharlal Nehru, Glimpses of World History, New York, 1948, pp. 142, 144.

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