

Right n. 43: Right of the Older One

حق الكبير

وَأَمَّا حَقُّ الْكَبِيرِ فَإِنَّ حَقَّهُ تَوْقِيرُ سِنِّهِ وَإِجْلَالُ إِسْلَامِهِ إِذَا كَانَ مِنْ أَهْلِ الْفَضْلِ فِي الْإِسْلَامِ بِتَقْدِيمِهِ فِيهِ وَتَرْكُ مُقَابَلَتِهِ عِنْدَ الْخِصَامِ وَلَا تَسْبُقُهُ إِلَى طَرِيقٍ، وَلَا تَوْمُهُ فِي طَرِيقٍ وَلَا تَسْتَجْهَلُهُ. وَإِنْ جَهِلَ عَلَيْكَ تَحَمَّلْتَ وَأَكْرَمْتَهُ بِحَقِّ إِسْلَامِهِ مَعَ سِنِّهِ فَإِنَّمَا حَقُّ السِّنِّ بِقَدْرِ الْإِسْلَامِ. وَلَا قُوَّةَ إِلَّا بِاللَّهِ.

And the right of him who is older than you is that you should respect him because of his age, and honor his submission to God since he has precedence (over you) in Islam. You should refrain from confronting him in disputes and should not surpass him or walk ahead of him, and you should not consider him to be foolish. If he behaves foolishly with you, you should put up with it and honor him because of the right of his Islam and his age. This is because the right of age is in the same measure as (the right of) Islam. And there is no power but in God.

Regarding old age we read in the Qur'an:

قَالَ رَبِّ أَنَّى يَكُونُ لِي غُلَامٌ وَقَدْ بَلَغَنِيَ الْكِبَرُ

“He said: O my Lord! How shall I have a son seeing I am very old ...” [The Holy Qur'an, Al-i-Imran 3:40]

In addition, in another verse the Qur'an refers to being the biggest:

فَجَعَلَهُمْ جُودًا إِلَّا كَبِيرًا لَهُمْ لَعَلَّهُمْ إِلَيْهِ يَرْجِعُونَ

“So he broke them to pieces, (all) but the biggest of them, that they might turn (and address

themselves) to it.” [The Holy Qur’an, al-Anbiyaa 21:58]

In another verse, we see the Qur’an referring to leader:

إِنَّهُ لَكَبِيرُكُمْ الَّذِي عَلَّمَكُمُ السِّحْرَ

“Surely this must be your leader who has taught you magic” [The Holy Qur’an, Taha 20:71]

In short, Imam Sajjad states that elders should be respected due to their greatness, age and being Muslim. He has admonished us against any form of harsh treatment with the elders. Next, we will review how the Qur’an looks at this issue.

Weakness in Childhood and Old Age

Our life always begins with weakness in childhood, and ends with weakness in old age. Children grow up to be strong and make progress, and attain power. Each day they move closer to their peak of youth and gain more strength. On the other hand, old people deteriorate everyday, and get weaker everyday they approach the termination of their life. In this regard, the Holy Qur’an says:

اللَّهُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ ضَعْفٍ ثُمَّ جَعَلَ مِنْ بَعْدِ ضَعْفٍ قُوَّةً ثُمَّ جَعَلَ مِنْ بَعْدِ قُوَّةٍ ضَعْفًا وَشَيْبَةً

“It is God who created you in a state of (helpless) weakness, then gave (you) strength after weakness. Then after strength, gave (you) weakness and a hoary head ...” [The Holy Qur’an, al-Rum 30:54]

In another verse the Holy Qur’an says:

وَمَنْ نُعَمِّرْهُ نُنَكِّسْهُ فِي الْخَلْقِ أَفَلَا يَعْقِلُونَ

“If We grant long life to any, We cause him to be reversed in nature. Will they not then understand?” [The Holy Qur’an, Ya-Sin 36:68]

We lose all our physical strength and our health deteriorates as we get old. Our understanding turns into lack of comprehension, our strong memory is converted into senility, our strength deteriorates and turns into weakness. Our perfection turns into shortcomings, our power turns into disability, and our freshness and beauty turns into wrinkles and ugliness. When we get old we not only cannot learn new things, we will also forget what we learned earlier. In this regard, the Holy Qur’an says:

وَاللَّهُ خَلَقَكُمْ ثُمَّ يَتَوَفَّاكُمْ وَمِنْكُمْ مَنْ يُرَدُّ إِلَى أَرْدَلِ الْعُمَرِ لِكَيْ لَا يَعْلَمَ بَعْدَ عِلْمٍ شَيْئًا

“It is God who creates you and takes your souls at death. And of you there are some who are sent back to a feeble age, so that they know nothing after having known (much) ...” [The Holy Qur’an, al-Nahl 16:70]

Once we get old, we have to live with all the troubles of old age.

The Old as Social Outcasts

One of the calamities for the elderly is their natural separation from the active work force in the society due to their old age and weakness. They have to retire, and stay home. A worst calamity for the elderly is for them not to find the love and respect they deserve in their family. The haughty young children might treat them with harshness or might ruthlessly cast them out of their own homes; and they will be left alone with a broken heart and no love and support. Such people will suffer a lot, and shall soon perish.

Death Due to Psychological Stress

Dr. Adolph who is a member of the American College of Surgeons stated: “When I was working as an intern in the hospital, we treated a seventy-year old lady for a broken hip bone. While I was reviewing her x-rays, I noticed that she was healing rapidly and her bones were rapidly reconstructing themselves.

I congratulated her for the very good reaction of her body to the treatment. She had improved a lot, and could walk using some canes instead of a wheel-chair. The surgeon who had operated on her told me that she had recuperated and could be released in twenty-four hours. On the same day, her daughter came to the hospital to visit her. I told her that her mother had recuperated and she could take her home the next day. She did not tell me anything and went to talk with her mother.

She told her that her husband had said that they could not take her back home anymore, and that they might be able to take her to the home for the elderly. A few hours later, I was called in to check on her. She was in a very bad state and died in less than twenty-four hours. She had recuperated from a difficult surgery on her broken hip, but could not withstand her heart being broken. Her broken heart could no longer be treated!¹

Unfortunately, we cast out our elderly from our warm and sweet homes into the homes for the elderly. This form of dealing with them has added an additional burden to their already extensive amount of problems due to aging. However, Islam has expressed its educational programs and ethics under the subject of the rights of the elders.

Respect for the Elders as Viewed in Traditions

The rights of the elders are respected in Islam. Families are taught to honor and respect their elders

instead of casting them out to the homes for the elderly. We will point out some of the traditions in this respect. There are several related traditions in the Chapter “Al-Isharat” in *Usul al-Kafi*. Abdullah ibn Sin'an narrated that Imam Sadiq said:

إِنَّ مِنْ إِجْلَالِ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ إِجْلَالِ الشَّيْخِ الْكَبِيرِ.

“Part of reverence to God, the Exalted, the High, is to show reverence to an old man.”²

Imam Sadiq quoted on the authority of the Noble Prophet of God :

مَنْ عَرَفَ فَضْلَ كَبِيرٍ لِسِنِّهِ فَوَقَّرَهُ آمَنَهُ اللَّهُ مِنْ فَزَعِ يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ.

“Anyone who recognizes the high status of old people and respects them, God will save him from experiencing the might and fear of the Resurrection Day.”³

Imam Sadiq said:

ثَلَاثَةٌ لَا يَجْهَلُ حَقَّهُمْ إِلَّا مُنَافِقٌ مَعْرُوفٌ بِالنِّفَاقِ: ذُو الشَّيْبَةِ فِي الْإِسْلَامِ وَحَامِلُ الْقُرْآنِ وَالْإِمَامُ الْعَادِلُ.

“There are three whose rights none are ignorant of except a hypocrite known for his hypocrisy: an elderly (white haired) person in Islam, the bearer of the Qur'an, and the just Imam.”⁴

Ibn Sin'an narrated that Imam Sadiq told him:

مِنْ إِجْلَالِ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ إِجْلَالُ الْمُؤْمِنِ ذِي الشَّيْبَةِ، وَمَنْ أَكْرَمَ مُؤْمِنًا فَبِكْرَامَةِ اللَّهِ بَدَأَ وَمَنْ اسْتَخَفَّ بِمُؤْمِنٍ ذِي شَيْبَةٍ أَرْسَلَ اللَّهُ إِلَيْهِ مَنْ يَسْتَخِفُّ بِهِ قَبْلَ مَوْتِهِ.

“Part of reverence to God, the Exalted, the High, is showing reverence to an elderly (white-haired) believer. Whoever respects a believer has begun with the respect of God, and whoever holds an elderly believer in light estimation, God will send to him one who will hold him in contempt before he dies.”⁵

God the Almighty said:

الشَّيْبُ نُورِي وَأَنَا أُسْتَحْيِي أَنْ أُعَذِّبَ نُورِي بِنَارِي.

“White hair is My light, and I am ashamed to punish My light with My Fire.”⁶

Ibn Abi Shu'bah narrated that the Prophet of God admonished against cutting white hair and said:

هُوَ نُورُ الْمُؤْمِنِ.

*"It is the light of the believer."*⁷

A man from the Hozayl tribe went to see God's Prophet and said: "O' Prophet of God! I am old. My bones are fragile. I have lost my power, and cannot pray and fast as I should." The Prophet said: "Repeat your words. There are no sticks or stones around which are not crying for you as a sign of mercy. How can God not have mercy upon you?"⁸

When it was time to punish the people of Lot, God the Almighty put it off until dawn. When the Prophet Lot asked why, Gabriel told him that God says: "There is an old man with a white beard sleeping on his back amongst these people. I have put off their punishment until he turns his face around."

God's Prophet said:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ تَعَالَى يَنْظُرُ فِي وَجْهِ الشَّيْخِ صَبَاحاً وَمَسَاءً فَيَقُولُ: عَبْدِي! كَبُرَ سِنَّكَ وَدَقَّ عَظْمُكَ وَرَقَّ جِلْدُكَ وَقَرُبَ أَجْلُكَ وَحَانَ قُدُومُكَ عَلَيَّ فَاسْتَخِي مِنِّي فَأَنَا أَسْتَخِي مِنْ شَيْبَتِكَ أَنْ أُعَذِّبَكَ فِي النَّارِ.

"Every morning and night, God the Exalted looks upon the face of the old man and says: O My servant! You have become old, your bones have become fragile, your skin has become delicate, your time of death is near, and the time has come for your arrival before Me. Therefore, be ashamed before Me, for I am too ashamed of your white hair to chastise you in the Fire."

Then the Prophet cried. They asked him the reason for crying. He said:

أُبْكِي مِمَّنْ يَسْتَخِي اللَّهَ مِنْهُ وَهُوَ لَا يَسْتَخِي مِنَ اللَّهِ.

*"I weep for one before whom God is ashamed, but he is not ashamed before God."*⁹

Imam Sadiq said:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لِيُكَرِّمُ أَبْنَاءَ السَّبْعِينَ وَيَسْتَخِي مِنْ أَبْنَاءِ الثَّمَانِينَ فَيَأْمُرُ بِأَنْ تُكْتَبَ لَهُمُ الْحَسَنَاتُ وَتَمْحَى عَنْهُمْ السَّيِّئَاتُ.

*"God treats people in their seventies with honor, and is ashamed before eighty-year olds. Thus he orders that good deeds be recorded for them and their sins be wiped out."*¹⁰

Respecting the Old Will Save You from the Penalty

God's Prophet said:

مَنْ وَقَّرَ ذَا شَيْبَةٍ لِشَيْبَتِهِ أَمَّنَهُ اللَّهُ تَعَالَى مِنْ فَزَعِ يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ.

“He who respects the old for their age and white hair, God, the Exalted, will safeguard him from the terror of the Day of Judgment.” [11](#)

We quoted several traditions that stressed the importance of respecting the elderly. There may be many old people in any society. The civilized world has opted to separate them from their sweet homes and cast them out into homes for the elderly. However, Islam has stressed that their white hair is a sign of due respect and a source of blessings for us. Islam instructs us to honor them now that they have approached the end of their life.

We should not oppose them, or treat them with anger and hurt their feelings. We should realize that they have become impatient due to their old age. They have lost their ability to withstand difficulties such as hunger, thirst and other things. We should also learn that God is shy of old people. They should be shy of God, too. They should not commit sins. There are some people who have gotten used to sinning. They should cleanse their souls by sincerely repenting to God, and seeking God's forgiveness and mercy.

[1.](#) Guftar-i-Falsafi (Buzurgsal wa Jawan), v.2, p.342, quoted from Ithbat Wujud-e-Khuda, p.250.

[2.](#) Usul al-Kafi, v.2, p.658.

[3.](#) Ibid.

[4.](#) Usul al-Kafi, v.2, p.658.

[5.](#) Ibid.

[6.](#) Sharh-i-Risalat al-Huquq, Ghopanchi, v.2, p.445, and Safinah al-Bihar, v. 1, on white hair.

[7.](#) Ibid.

[8.](#) Ibid.

[9.](#) Sharh-i-Risalat al-Huquq, Ghopanchi, v.2, p.445, and Safinah al-Bihar, v. 1, on white hair.

[10.](#) Ibid.

[11.](#) Ibid.

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