

# ~ THE ROLE OF ~ SAYYIDA ZAYNAB (PBUH) IN OUR INTELLECTUAL HERITAGE



I use the term "intellectual" to translate the Arabic word 'aql. By Islamic intellectual heritage I mean simply those ideas and thoughts which caused a revolution in the souls of people taking them closer to the Divine – to Allah – in other words towards their full potential.



وَلِكُلِّ وَجْهَةٌ

صَلَاةٌ

هُوَ مُوَلِّيهَا

فَأَسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ





No religion can survive, much less flourish without a living intellectual tradition. In order to verify this let's ask ourselves. What was the intellectual tradition for? What function did it play in Islamic society? What was its goal?

To ask these questions is the same as asking, "Why should we think?" The basic answer is that we are thinking beings because Allah gave us minds and intelligence and commanded us to think and to employ our intelligence.

No doubt, this does not mean that Allah requires us all to enter into the sophisticated sort of study and reflection that goes on in the intellectual tradition, because it is obvious that not everyone has the proper sort of talents, capacities, and circumstances to do so.

Nevertheless, as Muslims we have the moral and religious obligation to use our minds correctly. Of reading the Qur'an, He says:

أَفَلَا يَتَذَكَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ أَمْ عَلَى قُلُوبٍ أَقْفَالُهَا

The history of Islamic intellectuality is embodied in the various forms that Muslims have adopted over time in attempting to think rightly and correctly. The intellectual tradition was robust and lively, so disagreements were common. Nevertheless, in all the different schools of thought that have appeared over Islamic history, one principle has been agreed upon by everyone. This principle is the fact that God is one and that He is the only source of truth and reality. He is the origin of all things, and all things return to Him. To think Islamically is to recognize God's unity and to draw the proper consequences from His unity.

**Differences of opinion arise concerning the proper consequences, not in the fact that God is one.**

The sacrifice of Imam Husayn on the plains of Karbala invokes a thought process in any thinking human being? Was the difference in opinion concerning Allah so catastrophic that it resulted in a battle where Muslims lost their humanity? Let us not forget that both sides were the followers of the One God and His messenger.

No sacrifice is complete without the transmission of its message.

It has to be a two-man team – Imam needed someone to watch his back and ensure the message of tawheed lived in its true sense. He picked a woman – his sister Zaynab (pbuh) to implement the strategy of ensuring that the message lived. I believe it was the tougher of the two jobs. A woman to be the marketing director for truth in an era of

despotic male dominated hierarchies. She got the job done and established an institution whose value is under rated. The institution she established is called majlis (pl. Majalis). Sayyida Zaynab (pbuh) on freed from prison in Damascus, requested a place where she could narrate the events of Karbala and this was the first majlis.



On the return of the prisoners to Madina, Sayyida Zaynab (pbuh) made majalis a standpoint in the city. It took aroused such strong emotions in the people and such revulsion against the oppressor that Amr ibne Said ibne al-Aas wrote to Yazid to have her exiled from Madina. This was done in the beginning of 62 AH and she died shortly afterwards in Damascus or Cairo.

In its technical sense, a majlis is a meeting, a session or a gathering. In reference to Husayn, it means a gathering to remember the message of Husayn (pbuh). In this sense it was first used by Imam Ja'far As Sadiq (pbuh) It is reported that his companion

Fudhayl Ibne Yasaar came to visit him. After the exchange of usual courtesies, Imam asked al-Fudhayl: "Do you people ever organise majalis to recall the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (pbuh)?" Al-Fudhayl, with tears pouring down his eyes, replied: "Yabna Rasulillah, indeed we do." The Imam said: "May Allah bless you. I highly approve of such majalis."

The majlis has evolved into a sitting where intellectual thoughts are set into motion. She made the majlis of Husayn (pbuh) the symbol to distinguish between right and wrong, oppressed and the oppressor, truth and the falsehood.

### **The message of the majlis concentrates on two things:**

- 1. The message of freedom through eiman (faith) as propagated by Imam Husayn (pbuh).**
- 2. The condemnation of those who condoned the oppression of the body and mind for power as Yazid did.**

Public demonstration of grief first occurred in 351 A.H. On the 10th of Muharram, there was a spontaneous procession in the street of Baghdad and thousands of men, women and children came out chanting "Ya Husayn! Ya Hussain!" and reciting elegies.

In the same year, a similar procession took place in Egypt.

Different cultures adopted different modes of the majlis. Taimur Lang introduced the institution of tabut and alam in India. As Islam spread southwards on the sub-Continent, the form underwent changes to take into account local cultural influences so as to portray the message of Kerbala in the medium best understood by the local people, both Muslims and non-Muslims.

By the beginning of the 19th Century, there was not a corner of the world, from Spain to Indo-China, which did not have some form of demonstration on the 10th of Muharram.

The form varied from country to country. In Iran, the most popular form has been passion plays as a medium transmit the message of Kerbala in addition to the majaalis from the minabir.

In India, the Ashura processions became part of the Indian Muslim culture. Even the Hindus participated in these processions. The Maharajah of Gwalior was always seen walking behind the 'alam of Abbas barefooted and without any insignia of his exalted office. The majlis had such a strong influence that it not only strengthened eiman but also political resolve.



History reports that even Gandhi on his famous salt march to protest against the oppression of the British Raj took 72 people with him in emulation of Imam Husayn's (pbuh) protest against Yazid's oppression.

The thought process and the evolution of majlis continues. Today as an offshoot of majlis there are activities such as blood donations in the name of Husayn (pbuh); distribution of food to the needy and countless other humanitarian acts.....

The institution of majlis produced scholars, book writers, eulogist poets, poets describing scenes of battles, and poets plucking the strings of hearts, making them emanate love and making them weep.....

The silent revolution brought by the Majlis with orderliness and peace rules the lives of the Majlis goer; ensuring continuous intellectual thought about God and the goal of the human being.

Let me suggest that majlis is a solution for the most basic problem that we Muslims suffer from today – traditionally called "compound ignorance," jahl murakkab. Ignorance is not to know. "Compound ignorance" is not to know that you do not know. Too many of us do not know who we really are, we do not know how to think Islamically, and we do not know that we do not know. Majlis 'puts it in your face' as such. Understanding cannot be imposed or legislated, it can only grow up from the heart and she did that. With an institution that tugs at the heart strings.

And all this  
implemented by  
a woman without  
compromising  
her role as a  
daughter, sister,  
wife and mother.  
The uniqueness  
of Zaynab, I  
believe is within  
the reach of every  
woman.

### 3 points I want to leave with you:

1. **She was a woman.**
2. **She had lived through a massacre which wiped out her entire family, taken prisoner, tied and paraded through the streets.**
3. **Net intellect without courage is weak, and courage without intellect is foolish – you got to have both and she had both.**