

The sanctity of human life

Can you think of any act more serious than taking the life of another human being? How heavy must the decision be to engage in such an action! Islam teaches that every human life is of infinite value. How can we engage in fighting if we value the human life of every single member of the enemy just as much as we value our own? If we think back in our own history, we can see times when there has been a tendency to rush into battle. Is it cowardice to seek to avoid bloodshed if at all possible? Are there limits that cannot be crossed? When do we reach the point at which there seems to be no alternative but to fight?

During one of the Sikh wars in 1704, there was a water-carrier called Bhai Kanhaiya. He would have a skin of water slung over his back and his job would be to go to the sick and wounded to ease their suffering with a drink of water. His own comrades noticed that he was giving water to the injured of both sides. They complained to their leader, Guru Gobind Singh, who sent for the water-carrier. When Bhai Kanhaiya was questioned, he admitted freely that he had tended the wounded on both sides. He explained: 'I saw only suffering human beings.' The Guru commended his action, told him to continue, and gave him bandages and ointment so that he could better ease the suffering of all these human beings.

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Once Hussain knew that the agent of Yazid was commanded to come to him and demand that he take the oath of allegiance, he had a real question to resolve. He knew that Yazid had a powerful army behind him and that he was ruthless. Yazid could not afford to back down and therefore he would fight. Any battle with such a powerful army would result in massive loss of life. Hussain also knew that if he called people to arms, in order to defend the rightness of his cause, then a large number of people would respond. The result would be great numbers of Muslim dead. Many would be wounded and thus men would be incapable of providing for their families. This meant huge numbers of Muslim widows and orphans. This would be one of those most awful wars, a civil war, brother against brother, Muslims dead and crippled on both sides. Could that be avoided?

Surely, Hussain must have reflected on the situation when his own brother Hasan had seen Mu'awiya seize power at the death of their father, Ali. Hasan faced a similar problem: if he had called men to arms to oppose Mu'awiya, Muslim blood would have been spilt on both sides. Given the size and experience in battle of Mu'awiya's army, it was highly likely that the victory would have been theirs. Hasan knew as well that some of those who would have come to respond to his call would not remain when the going got tough and would withdraw and go home. Considering all the circumstances, Hasan decided to make the treaty with Mu'awiya. If he himself survived, then the message of the true interpretation of Islam would also survive. He could build up the faith and understanding of those who looked to him for spiritual leadership. In this way, the

message would live on in their lives. Even though it must have caused Hasan great pain to make that treaty, and to see the way in which Mu'awiya conducted himself in power, it was the right course, the most courageous thing to do.

Hussain's own father, Ali, was a noted warrior, a veteran of many battles. He was faced with a similar problem at the death of Muhammad. He knew that he had been designated by God and the Prophet to lead the community after Muhammad's death. Yet the community chose another path. Instead of calling his men to arms and engaging in a civil war with other Muslims, the companions of Muhammad himself, he decided to make his position clear in speech and then withdraw. Again, he was inspired by the value of every human life and wished to avoid bloodshed if possible; even to his own disadvantage. He also worked for the good of the community out of the limelight, where he could build them up to be true to the message of Islam.

On two further occasions in the life of Ali, we can see this same desire to spare bloodshed if at all possible. When he encountered the army of Mu'awiya at the Battle of Siffin in 657^{CE}, faced with many deaths on both sides, he agreed to go to arbitration. Even though he was betrayed and tricked by the agents of Mu'awiya, he held his resolve and remained true to his word. Some groups amongst his soldiers vehemently disagreed with his position and saw it as a lack of faith in God, because if they had faith and were in the right, then God would have granted them victory. They left his side and went away. Eventually, it was one of these who assassinated Ali in 661^{CE}. Again, we see his character. As he lay dying, he instructed that there should be no fighting or reprisals on account of his assassination. Only the assassin himself should be brought to justice.

Hussain must have heard reports of an incident in the life of Muhammad himself that happened when Hussain was only a small boy. Muhammad had seen in a dream that he was to make a visit to the city of Mecca as a pilgrimage to worship God at the Ka'bah, where his ancestor Abraham had worshipped. Abraham and Ishmael had built the Ka'bah, and then gone around and around it calling out the praises of God. When the Muslims of Medina knew that this was the Prophet's intention, they were delighted and resolved to join him in the pilgrimage. It was the right of all Arabs who came as pilgrims to enter Mecca, so this was something of a test. They had a great love for the pilgrimage city, even though it was presently forbidden to them because it was still in the hands of idol-worshippers, the seat of the enemy, who had fought them in three battles. They were all dressed as pilgrims, which meant that they bore no fighting weapons, and had made the intention to observe peace throughout.

It is reported that around 1,400 Muslims went with Muhammad towards Mecca. A delegation from Mecca came out to meet them at a place called Hudaibiyya. The Muslims were told that the Meccans would not allow them to enter the city. The Meccans went home that night and were to return in the morning for further discussions. It is reported that Muhammad went throughout his camp during the night taking a solemn promise from all his companions that they would obey him in the morning whatever he commanded. In the morning when negotiations resumed, Muhammad gave way to the Meccans on many points which left some of his companions deeply

dismayed because they saw it as a sign of weakness. However, Muhammad showed a deeper understanding of God's way. He was not concerned about appearing to lose face if he could avoid bloodshed and achieve long term gains. In the treaty it was agreed that Muhammad and his pilgrims would return home without entering Mecca, but from now on, Muslims from Medina were free to come to visit the city of Mecca. They could trade with the Meccans, which meant that more normal human relations could be established between the two communities. This led to the conversion of many of the Meccans to Islam and opened the way for Muslims in Mecca to worship openly. These treaty negotiations happened in 628^{CE}. It was agreed that in 629^{CE} a group of Muslims could come to Mecca as pilgrims, and the way was opened for Mecca to become a Muslim city from 630^{CE} onwards. All without the need for battle and the bloodshed that would go with it.

Many Muslim commentators on the Qur'an, have interpreted the verse, 'Indeed we have inaugurated for you a clear victory' (Q. 48:1) to be a reference to the Treaty of Hudaibiyya. It was a great but bloodless victory in the cause of justice, because ancient Arab custom said that all groups of pilgrims had the right to enter Mecca and worship at the Ka'bah. Indeed, it was a greater victory than this, because it restored Mecca to the Muslim community and won many converts to the way of Islam.

What was Hussain to do in the circumstances that he now faced? Bloodshed should be avoided if at all possible, such loss of human life would be a terrible thing. But a far greater tragedy would be the loss of the integrity of the message that had been entrusted to the Muslim community by the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad. That must be preserved in its purity at all costs. And so, Hussain resolved to avoid fighting if at all possible, but come what may, to fulfil his destiny of preserving the message of Islam.