

# Shia and Sunni Ashura

By: [Aslam Abdullah](#) Source: [IslamiCity](#)

During the early period of Prophet's mission in Makkah, Muslims fasted on Muharram (*First month of the Islamic calendar*) 10th. After the Muslims migrated to Medina the tradition was to fast for two days, on the 10th and on the day before or after the 10th. Ashura refers to the 10th of Muharram and according to Muslim beliefs it has a broad range of significant events that are attributed to this day. From the day of atonement of Prophet Adam after he was sent down to earth to the day Prophet Moses was able to bring the Israelites out of bondage from Pharaoh.

But in our recent memory, this day is remembered for one of the greatest tragedies that occurred in the early history of Muslims. It was on this day when Imam Hussein, son of Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ offered his life together with members of his family in the fields of Kerbala which is located in modern day Iraq. It was on this day when the army of Yazid who had claimed the title of Caliph (Head of the Muslim State) for himself confronted Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet, to extract his allegiance. It was on this day that Imam Hussain along with his family was brutally massacred. It is indeed a tragic day in Islamic history.

Shias observe this day as a day of great mourning reminding them of the sacrifices of Imam Hussein and his family. Most Sunnis on the other hand tend to minimize the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and instead focus on pre-Islamic prophetic events that are attributed to this day.

We must realize that the sacrifice that Imam Hussein gave was for the entire ummah not just for one section of the community. He stood for the universal principles of Islamic justice. He knew that life is sacred and a gift from Allah, yet he reached the conclusion that there comes a time in the life of individuals when the goals of life become more important than the life itself.

He believed that people could not be coerced into giving political allegiance to leaders they disagreed with. People had a right to dissent with rulers with dignity and honor. The resources of a nation belong to all and not to a dynasty, or aristocracy or an elite group. Imam Hussain taught us that coercion and violence are the weapons of despots in their campaign against truth and justice.

Thus, Imam Hussein challenged the decision of Mu'awiya, the ruler of the Muslim world at the time when he nominated his son Yazid as his successor. Imam Hussein was of the opinion that Islam was against dynastic rule and the nominated son was not qualified to lead the nation of Muslims. He was not alone in this opinion. Many of the companions in Medina and Makkah supported his ideas.

Against all odds of his time, Imam Hussein stood against the forces of Yezid in Kerbala realizing that those who had promised to be on his side had betrayed him. He knew he could be crushed and suffer dire consequences. Yet he decided to stand for his principles. He knew that compromise was not an option in these situations. He also realized that when the choice is so clear between right and wrong, one should offer all one has in defense of one's ideals. It was his ijtehad based on his understanding of the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet ﷺ and he stood by that.

It is this message that Imam Hussein offered his life for so that his example will be remembered by generations to come.

Unfortunately his message has been forgotten by one section of the community and lost in ritual by the other.

If people mourn this day to express their love and the tragic loss of the grandson of the Prophet, it should be within the limits that his grandfather set for these occasions. Mourning and repentance belongs to those who betrayed Imam Hussein and refused to support him even after inviting him to continue his resistance. It does not behoove those who see in the example of Imam Hussein a manifesto for the ummah to rid itself from all sorts of depots and tyrants in every aspect of life.

If people remain silent on martyrdom of Imam Hussain they must realize that he gave his life for the principles of righteousness that Allah introduced to the world through his grandfather, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

Tenth of Muharram is a day of great significance in Muslim history and it is a day when one of the great leaders of the community, Imam Hussein, knowingly and consciously accepted martyrdom for saving the soul of Islam. It should be a day to bring Shias and Sunnis together. Because it is a day of pride when freedom and justice was given priority over one's life and a day that should be viewed as the day of deliverance.

Both Sunnis and Shias can focus on the message of Imam Hussain and work together to rid their world of all sorts of repression that has negated the essence of divine guidance.

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