

The Moral-Ethical *Jihad* of the Qur'an

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As we approach another new year, our thoughts inevitably turn to Kerbala and the lessons that can be learnt from it. Imam Husayn's (AS) supreme sacrifices have taught us that a victory achieved through military strength and might is always temporal because another power can, in the future, bring it down in ruins. But a victory achieved through suffering and sacrifice is everlasting and leaves a permanent imprint on human consciousness. It is within this context that we can understand the different forms of *jihad*.

As we are aware, the primary meaning of *jihad* is to struggle or exert oneself. The Qur'an uses the word *jihad* in a generic sense, denoting any form of struggle in the cause of God (29:69). *Jihad* is also envisioned by the Qur'an as an important tool in the community's attempt to build a world order in which peace, justice, and equality prevail.

However, there are many forms of *jihad*. We can talk of the spiritual *jihad*, the ethical-moral *jihad* (to attain moral excellence), a social *jihad* (to win the hearts and minds of others) and the rational *jihad* (or *ijtihad*). Today, we can use the diverse forms of *jihad* to win the hearts of other human beings (through positive oriented actions), to remind people of the sacrifices of Imam Husayn (AS), and to speak out against all forms of oppression.

As human beings, we believe that oppression is evil. This is because oppressors take away the liberty that Allah has granted and puts chains around the God given freedom to think, act, and express ourselves. The Qur'an condemns oppression and asks

us to combat it. Interestingly, the Qur'an does not state that we must take a stand only when Muslims are oppressed. Rather, the Qur'an maintains that it is our duty to combat oppression wherever and whenever it occurs, regardless of who is perpetrating it. In fact, the Qur'anic demand is for us to stand for and by the truth, even if that means bearing testimony against our parents or ourselves (4:135).

Standing up for the truth is part of the ethical and moral *jihad* of the Qur'an. The Qur'an assumes that the moral *jihad* is ingrained in us. This is because moral categories such as good and evil are known by human beings because they are human beings and that they can perceive moral truths when confronted with a particular situation, independently of revelation. The moral *jihad* suggests a universal, ethical language that all human beings can connect to and engage in. As the Qur'an states, "He (God) has inspired in [human beings] the good or evil [nature] of an act, whosoever has purified it (the soul) has succeeded, one who corrupts it has surely failed." (91:8-10). The Qur'anic concept of a universal moral order is thus grounded in the recognition of an innate disposition engraved in the human conscience.

Speaking out or writing against evil is part of the call of Imam Husayn (AS). It is within this context that we can understand his famous sermon, "O People, don't you see that truth is not being practiced and evil is not being combated so that a believer can meet his Lord on the right path? "I do not view death except as a path to everlasting happiness while living under the oppressors is abject humiliation."

The moral *jihad* is not only to speak out against wrongdoing but also to awaken the conscience that often lies in slumber. One of the greatest tragedies of modern times is the "me" culture whereby human beings have lost touch with their conscience and sense

of moral values. Many of us feel that as long as we are not afflicted by wrongdoing then we should not be concerned by it. To be indifferent when evil occurs is wrong precisely because it blurs the moral boundary between good and evil and leads to moral decadence. As a matter of fact, indifference is condemned precisely because a person sees evil being perpetrated yet does not feel anything because the conscience has been “numbed”. It was because of the desire to revolutionize the minds of the feeble-minded Muslims on the one hand and to check the decadence of Islamic principles on the other that Imam Husayn (AS) embarked on the fateful journey to Kufa.

Thus the ethical-moral struggle in the Qur’an is to maintain a healthy conscience on the one hand and to connect with and help fellow human beings on the other. We need to realize that we are connected to fellow human beings by a universal and ethical language. The basis of such a universal moral order can also be traced to verses like the following, “Humankind, be aware of your duties to your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered abroad many men and women (4:1).” The verse suggests a common genesis and unity of human beings based on God’s creation. It also implies that human beings have to recognize and live with their differences. On the basis of universal ethical principles and a common human origin, the Qur’an posits the presence of an objective and universally binding moral standard that is accessible to all intelligent beings.

Finally, we can also talk of the social *jihad*. This is conducted in four stages: the first stage is to find the truth, then to stay on the true path (*istqama*), to help others find the true path and finally to help other stay on the true path (*wa tawasaw bi’l haqq*). To put it differently, the socio-moral *jihad* requires us not only to recognize what is good,

but to also do and become good (so that virtuous deeds emerge from us instinctly). The final stage in this socio-moral *jihad* is that, after a person becomes good, s/he generates goodness around him/her so that when people see him/her they are attracted toward virtue and piety. It was the fight against evil and establishment of goodness that Imam Husayn (AS) strove for. Let us end by quoting the words of a poet. They epitomize the stance which Imam Husayn (AS) adopted:

“The soul is precious, but for you, O my Lord I will forsake it”

Being slain is bitter, but in your path, my Lord it becomes sweet.”

To you, O Imam Husayn, we send our salutations and greetings. The message and principles you fought for will forever remain alive.