

Mother's Day

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In the saying “Behind every great man is a woman” the woman is commonly understood to refer to the wife. If a man has achieved greatness, then it means that his wife has played a big role in that, and no one thinks that his mother, who brought him up, played a great role and made him what he is.

Some Muslims are against celebrating Mother's Day with the rest of the Americans because it is so commercialized. Of course, this argument is wrong. Other Muslims celebrate it in the same way as the Americans do, and that is also not commensurate with the message of Islam. In Islam, a Mother is not honored for just one day of the year, but for 365 days! Therefore, giving her a gift on one day of the year will not compensate her.

Let us analyze the thorny topic of the situation and position of a mother. There are a lot of people talking about the Muslim woman. In the Muslim world, the imams¹ talk about the woman in the *khutba*² of Jum'ah³ every week. You

will hardly find a mosque where an imam, during his *khutba*, does not insert some statement about the woman, and it is always a derogatory one. And, in fact, by doing this, we are contradicting ourselves. Who is the Muslim woman? She is my mother, my wife, my daughter, or my sister. So whenever I talk in a derogatory manner about her, as they say in the Arabic proverb, “If you insult your brother, you are spitting in your own face.”

There are some Muslims who quote “hadith”⁴ – personally, I don't know where they get them from – some of them are mentioned in very well-known books, but others are mentioned in books which are considered to be very weak and not authentic. Imagine when some one quotes the Prophet, peace be upon him, as saying: “Be nice to the woman because she is created from a curved rib, and if you try to straighten it, you will break it.” Hadith! And I sometimes ask myself, would the Prophet say this about his mother? Logically? Another “hadith”: “Women have a defect in their brain and in their

¹ Religious leaders

² Sermon

³ Friday

⁴ A report or account of what the Prophet said

religion." Would the Prophet say this? And who would fall in this category? 'Āyishah!⁵ The woman about whom the Prophet said, pointing to her: "Take half of your religion from that woman;" 'Āyishah, the woman who taught both males and females, and narrated nearly one third of the ahadith;⁶ 'Āyishah, the woman to whom the Qur'an itself gives the title "Mother of the Believers."⁷ And we say... we say, "She has a defect in her brain and her religion"? How is the woman – a mother – portrayed in Islam when Muslims quote such ahadith that contradict what is written in the Qur'an, and also contradict other ahadith? That is the sermon which I would like to obtain from the American Mother's Day.

Imagine comparing the two ahadith above, with a third hadith, which is also attributed to the Prophet, peace be upon him: "Paradise lies under the feet of the mother." A non-Muslim American reading these ahadith will conclude that Muhammad is contradicting himself. And there are people, nowadays, who concentrate mainly on ahadith; they bombard everyone with ahadith, and even when you mention a Qur'anic verse, they answer with a hadith. And, as a result, they spoil Islam; they make Islam appear unworthy and they make it a topic of ridicule. They forget that there are various sources for Islam with the Qur'an being the most authentic and powerful. If a solution of our problem can be found in the Qur'an, there is no need to resort to any other source. If we don't find any direction in the Qur'an, then we look to the second source which is the hadith.

Let us see what the Qur'an says about Mother. The Qur'an says, "Your God has decreed that ye worship none but Him, and that ye be kind to parents..." [17:23]. That is the message which we have to implant in the minds of our children, not having them buy a gift. That is the best gift: to be kind to your mother and your father. Pay attention to how the Qur'an decrees it: worship God and God only, and be kind to your parents. See the order of the commands: after the worship of God, one's parents are next in line for service. Then the Qur'anic verse goes on, "If either or both of them reach old age never say *ouf* to them." The word "*ouf*" in Arabic language indicates, "I don't like that". It is the mildest expression to show that you don't like what is happening. The Qur'an recommends that if one or both of your parents reach old age in your house, don't even say *ouf* to them; don't yell at them, say a kind word: that is the recommendation of the

Qur'an if the parents reach old age. What if they are dead? The Qur'an says, they are still your parents and you still have a duty towards them even if they are dead. [Imam quotes Arabic verse, and repeats it. The English translation is:]

"Do not set up any other deity side by side with God, lest thou find thyself disgraced and forsaken: for thy Sustainer has ordained that you shall worship none but Him. And do good unto thy parents. Should one of them, or both, attain to old age in thy care, never say *ouf* to them, but always speak unto them with reverent speech, and spread over them humbly the wings of thy tenderness, and say: 'O my Sustainer! Bestow Thy grace upon them, even as they cherished and reared me when I was a child'" [17:22-24].

See the metaphorical language; we frequently observe the tender image of birds protecting and sheltering their young ones by covering them with their wings. So the Qur'an is using that expression and saying, lower your wing to your parents out of mercy to them, and pray for them: O God, forgive them as they took care of me while I was a helpless child. The Prophet has said: "When a child of Adam dies, his actions and deeds which will benefit his soul and attain salvation for him on the Day of Judgment, will cease, except three: 1) *sadaqa jāriyah*,⁸ 2) any knowledge which he/she left behind that will benefit the public, 3) and a righteous child who will pray for him, asking for mercy for him."

The relationship is one of pay and repay: I help you today while you are a helpless child; you help me tomorrow when I am old. Now let us put this in the context of our life in the 20th century. When someone receives the good news that his wife delivered a baby at Toledo Hospital, it would be even nicer if the baby was a *boy*. You know, for a long time, I thought it was characteristic of Arabs only to want boys, but I've found that Americans are worse; everybody loves to have boys. After the good news of a safe delivery, that child is the delight of the parents' eye during the stages of his development. When the child reaches the age of adulthood, then the relationship should be two-way, as the Qur'an recommends, but the situation changes and the relationship appears to be one way. There is an Egyptian proverb which says, "Every man has a child but he has no father." It means that a man takes care of his children, but when his father or his mother is in need, he considers that as something additional, and he feels his children are more deserving of his help. Today, we find that when one or both parents reach old age, we look for a nursing home for them. According to the recommendation of the Qur'an, it is not

⁵ The wife of the Prophet

⁶ Plural of hadith

⁷ 33:6

⁸ Continuous charity

supposed to be this way. It is supposed to be that I took care of my child while he was a helpless infant and his duty is to take care of me while I am a helpless old man, and not only that, in the case of children, they still have a duty to pray for their parents even after their death. That is the recommendation of Islam.

Let us forget the father and concentrate on the mother a little bit, because she is a woman, and a woman is considered a "second class citizen", as some people say. But look at how the Qur'an talks especially about her. The Qur'anic verses are very short but to the point. [Imam quotes. The English translation is:]

"We have enjoined on man kindness to his parents: in pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth. The carrying of the child to his weaning is a period of thirty months" [46:15].

"We have enjoined upon man goodness towards his parents: his mother bore him by enduring strain upon strain [the strain of pregnancy followed by the strain of delivery] and feeding him of her milk the rest of the two years. Show gratitude to Me and to thy parents, to Me is thy final goal" [31:14].

The expression "the rest of the two years" in this verse has caused debate among Muslim scholars who analyze the Qur'an to uncover its meanings. Considering that pregnancy lasts nine months, what is left of the 24 months ("the rest of the two years") is 15 months. This means that a mother breastfeeds her child for 15 months. Another Qur'anic verse⁹ mentions that a mother is supposed to breastfeed her child for two years "if they [meaning both parents] would like to complete the term". The difference between the first verse and the second verse is six months: one says 2 years including the total time of the pregnancy and the breast-feeding, while the other verse says two years for the breast-feeding alone. From this the ulama¹⁰ calculated that the minimum duration of pregnancy which will result in the birth of a normal baby is, at least, six months (26 weeks).¹¹ [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The English translation is:]

"And the divorced mothers may nurse their children for two whole years if they wish to complete the period of

nursing; and it is incumbent upon him who has begotten the child [the father] to provide in a fair manner for their sustenance and clothing. No human being shall be burdened with more than what he is well able to bear: neither shall a mother be made to suffer because of her child, nor, because of his child, he who has begotten it. And the same duty rests upon the father's heir" [2:233].

This verse, also, is evidence for the kind of relationship that should exist between husband and wife. The wife, before giving her milk to her *own* child, is entitled to ask the father for expenses; he has to pay for that. The father of the baby has the duty of feeding them and clothing them *bil-ma'rūf*. This word *bil-ma'rūf* is used in the Qur'an many, many times and because of such words we can mould and shape the meaning of the Qur'an to suit any time and any place. That word *bil-ma'rūf* is very broad; it means, "according to the standard of the present time and the present environment". So, everything recommended by Islam is to be commensurate with the common situation where you are living. Based on this concept, I say that the method of preaching Islam in Africa, for example, will not be suitable for preaching Islam in America. You have to use a special language and special approach for this environment, and a special language and special approach for the African environment: it is a delicate and hard task. Imam As-Shāfi'i¹², *radiya-Allahu-'anhu*,¹³ lived part of his life in Egypt and part of his life in Baghdad. When he was in Iraq, he used to give certain fatwas which were opposite to fatwas he gave in Egypt. When the people questioned him, he said, "Baghdad is one kind of environment and Egypt is another kind of environment and Islam is very broad-based and flexible; it is applicable in every place and in every time. You take that part of Islam which suits the environment of Iraq and utilize it over there, and you take that part of Islam which suits the environment of Egypt and utilize it there."

You know, nowadays, some of our brothers¹⁴ prohibit the use of forks and spoons because the Prophet never used a fork or a spoon. Many of our brothers spread newspapers on the ground to sit on and eat, claiming that is Islam, because there were no chairs and no tables at the time of the Prophet. But there were no newspapers either! There was no electricity. There was no natural gas. There were no cars. Our brothers eat, sitting on the floor, but they are sitting in a comfortably air-conditioned, carpeted house, well-lit by

⁹ 2:233

¹⁰ Scholars

¹¹ Amazingly, this holds true even today with the aid of incubators, oxygen tents, feeding tubes and other medical devices, whereas the ulama arrived at this conclusion many centuries ago. The normal gestation period is 40 weeks.

¹² Founder of the Shāfi'i school of thought

¹³ May God be pleased with him

¹⁴ Contemporary Muslims

electric bulbs in chandeliers, the food is cooked on a natural gas or electric stove, and when they are finished eating, they go out to the mall in their Cadillac cars. And when they want to visit their families back home, they go by aeroplane. If we are going to stick to the means and methods that existed at the time of the Prophet, then we are in trouble. The Muslims who eat sitting on the ground because "the Prophet never had a table or chair" are not living their lives like the Prophet, otherwise they would light candles, suffer the heat and the cold, not use heating and air-conditioning, and drive camels not cars, because the Prophet did not have all that. They are very selective of the *sunnah*¹⁵ of the Prophet when it comes to practicing it themselves. But the Prophet used those items because they were the only available items at that time; there was no other choice. We have a Qur'anic verse which is to the point: [Imam quotes. The English translation is:]

"Say: 'Who is there to forbid the beauty and the provisions which God has provided for his creatures, and the good things from among the means of sustenance?'" [7:32].

That's the Qur'an. So, we are not against celebrating Mother's Day, but we have to look at it in an Islamic context. We have to instill in our children their duties towards their mothers and fathers, and show them that, in this life, it is a matter of pay and repay, while after their death, they owe them the duty of praying for them.

When the American people come and visit us here,

and I say to them that, if I follow the right Islam, I'm not supposed to put my father in a nursing home, that he must be my responsibility, they are stunned. That is the lesson which we have to take from Mother's Day which is being celebrated and publicized for the last two, three weeks now. Mother's Day, for Muslims, is not one day a year, but 365 days a year.

I have a little story with which I will conclude – and I'll say it in Arabic and in English – a story which will show us the value of a mother. The Prophet, peace be upon him, one day had a visitor who said to him: "Prophet, as you know, my mother took care of me. She carried me in her womb for nine months, she fed me, she cleaned me, she did this, this, this for me until I became a young man capable of taking care of myself. Now she is an old lady and I have no one to care for her at home. So, I carry her on my back if I am traveling, or working; where ever I am she is on my back. I feed her, I clean her; I do everything that she did for me. Do you think that I have paid her back?"

The Prophet said: "No."

He said: "O Prophet, I am doing everything she has done for me, how come I have not been able to pay her back?"

The Prophet replied: "Because, when she was carrying you, she used to pray to God to grant you a long life, but you are carrying her nowadays and you are praying to God for her to die as quickly as possible. That is the difference."

¹⁵ The example of the Prophet embodied in his statements and actions