

Sayyidah Zaynab (as) and the Majlis al-‘Azā: Origins, Spiritual Purpose, and Contemporary Challenges in the Commemoration of Karbalā

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This article is lovingly dedicated to Aliasghar Shaikh Shoaib Khambaty, my beloved brother-in-law, who, because of his unwavering Wilayah of Ahl al-Bayt (‘a), was tragically killed by a Zalim in Karachi, Pakistan, on 18th April 2013. May the rain of Shafa‘at from Al-Khamsat al-Athar (as) and Sayyidah Zaynab (as) forever continue to shower upon him. Āmīn.

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Abstract: The institution of Majlis (“a place of sitting or gathering”) occupies a central position in the devotional life of Muslims, particularly within Shi’a Islam. Beyond its literal meaning, Majlis refers to congregational assemblies commemorating the Shahadah of Sayyid-ush-Shuhada, Moula Abi Abdillah al-Imam al-Husayn ibn Ali (as), and the Ahl al-Bayt (as), who sacrificed everything in the plains of Karbala for the preservation of Islam. This tradition, attributed to the courage of Sayyidah Zaynab (as), who fearlessly exposed the tyranny of Yazid (L) and delivered eloquent sermons in Kufa and Damishq, established Majlis as an enduring institution of spiritual awakening, moral reflection, and communal solidarity. The Majlis serves multiple purposes: it amplifies love for Ahl al-Bayt of Rasulullah (S), rejects injustice, and educates participants on the principles of Amr bil Ma’ruf (enjoining good) and Nahi anil Munkar (forbidding evil). It functions as both remembrance and resistance, calling Mumineen across generations to answer Al Imam al-Husayn’s timeless cry: “Hal Min Nasirin Yansuruna?” (“Is there anyone to help us?”), by standing against contemporary forms of Yazidism and moral corruption. The Majlis is thus both devotional and transformative, guiding individuals to align thought and action with the principles of justice, sacrifice, and divine pleasure. However, modern practice often risks diluting this sacred institution. Common challenges include reducing Majlis to social custom, prioritizing hospitality over spiritual depth, seeking emotional comfort without moral transformation, or commercializing sacred service for worldly gain. Historical narratives, such as the contrasting fates of the Muslim transporter and Wahab ibn Abdullah al-Kalbi (ra), illustrate the profound consequences of intention: while one sought material profit and lost both worlds, the other embraced sacrifice and attained eternal felicity. Majlis al-Aza, therefore, remains not merely a cultural or sectarian ritual but a universal platform for ethical renewal. Its authentic spirit lies in reviving the Husayni principles of truth, justice, and selflessness, ensuring that Karbala continues to guide Muslim consciousness and social responsibility until Qiyamah.

Keywords: Majlis al-Aza; Imam al-Husayn (as); Karbala; Ahl al-Bayt (as); Sayyidah Zaynab (as); Shi’a Islam; Amr bil Ma’ruf; Nahi anil Munkar; Yazidism; Islamic spirituality.

1. What is Majlis?

Majlis is an Arabi term which denotes a place of sitting or gathering. Among the Shias, the term Majlis is used as a verb referring to a congregation observing, in particular, the sacrifice of Sayyid-ush-Shuhada, Moula Abi Abdillah al Imam al-Husayn ibn Ali (as), and Ahl al-Bayt (as). All credit for this tradition goes to Sharikat'il Husayn, Sayyidah Zaynab (as), who due to her Shujaat (valour) explained the real meaning of Islam in the presence of the Zalim and established the institution of Majlis eternally. She snatched the false veil of Islam from the face of Yazid and revealed his true character to the Ummah. Further, she discussed the Tafsir of Shahadah Al Husayn ibn Ali (as) in Karbala in a manner which differentiated Haq from Batil till the Qiyamah. It is the Ehs'an of Sayyidah Zaynab (as) that she spread the message of Husayn (as) and exposed the wretched ideology that Yazid (L) wanted to establish. Before releasing Al Imam Ali Zain al-Abideen (as) from Damishq jail, in the lust of power Yazid (L) arrogantly questioned if he wished for anything? The Imam (as) replied:

"I would have to consult my aunt, Sayyidah Zaynab (as)."

Arrangements were made and Sayyidah Zaynab bint Amir al Mumineen Ali (as) arrived. She exclaimed:

"Yazid! Since the day our Moula al-Husayn (as) was brutally butchered by the unsharpened Khanjar of Shimar Maloon in Karbala, we have not had any opportunity to mourn him."

A house was therefore provided in Damishq, Sham, where Sayyidah Zaynab (as) and the Ahl al-Bayt (as) held their first proper Majlis al-Aza of Al Imam al-Husayn (as).

Al Imam Ali Zain al-Abideen (as) sat on the Suzani of Al Imam al-Husayn Ibn Ali (as) and then Sayyidah Zaynab (as) narrated to the women of Damishq what trials and tribulations had befallen in Karbala and Kufa. They shed tears and mourned. From then onwards, Majlis al-Aza is observed and Buka became its integral part. Therefore, Majlis is not only reverence and love for the Nabavi family, but it also serves to purify the souls of participants by reminding them to practice the injunctions of the Shariah, for which al Imam al-Husayn (as) sacrificed everything.

2. What is the purpose of the Majlis?

i. Al Imam al-Husayn (as), his Ahl al-Bayt (as), and Ash'ab (ra) are a part of the Aqidah of Muslims and it is not fair to associate them with any particular school of thought. Al Imam al-Husayn (as) is a metaphor of love, peace, tolerance, and brotherhood, whereas Yazid (L) symbolizes terror, exploitation, oppression, nepotism, and evil. Therefore, since Muharram seeks to create an atmosphere of goodwill, devotees of Ahl al-Bayt (as) should set aside all personal differences and get together sincerely to listen to the Zikar al-Husayn (as). One of the purposes of the Majlis is to study and learn from the superior character and qualities of Al Imam al-Husayn (as) and Ahl al-Bayt (as) so that we can better ourselves, and refrain from committing sins like that of the enemies of Ahl al-Bayt (as).

ii. Through Majlis, we amplify our love for our Moula Al Imam al-Husayn (as), his Ahl al-Bayt (as), and Ash'ab (ra) with Marifah, and reject Yazid (L) and his likeminded supporters. We then seek to identify the "Right Path" by following and supporting Al Imam al-Husayn Ibn Amir al-Mumineen Ali (as) and identifying the route of Shait'an in following the Yazid and Shimar of our era and condemning them. From the event of Karbala two mindsets and ideologies were born, namely "Husayniyyat and Yazidiyat". Principles laid down by Al Imam al-Husayn (as) in Karbala can be set as standard-criterion by every Muslim to differentiate between good and evil, thus identifying the true enemy that is the army of Shait'an in various walks of life. Struggling against it with the virtue of courage, power of truth and firm commitment to gain the pleasure of Allah is compulsory.

iii. Learn from the Masa'ib that were faced by the Ahl al-Bayt (as) and share the pain of Sayyidah Fatimah al-Zahra (as) and her family. The blessings of Zikar al-Husayn (as) can help us attain Ajar and in forgiving our sins. The Majlis of Sayyid ash-Shuhada, Al Imam al-Husayn (as), and the tears that roll-down our cheeks are for the Mazlum Imam - with each droplet being a challenge to the Zalim. We are not the "Nation of Weepers", however, this weeping and wailing is a following of the Nabavi Sirah which has protected the real Aqidah. Recounting of the tragedy of Karbala has kept the Husayni message alive.

iv. One of the objectives of the 40 day Muharram-Safar congregations is to create spiritual awakening through "Amr Bil Ma'ruf" and "Nahi Anil Munkar." To become closer to Allah and reflect Karbala in the actions and choices, the role of the institution of Majlis is remarkable in every circumstance. Muharram is not for social gatherings and gossip; on the contrary, it is a platform from where the message of Islam is delivered to the entire world. This is why great care should be taken to ensure that only a righteous, worthy, pious and knowledgeable scholar of good repute gets to deliver the sermon from the Minbar.

v. The speaker of the Majlis should enhance the understanding of the meaning of Maruf and Munkar, which is the essence of Majlis - in the enforcement of these two principles, Moula al-Husayn (as) sacrificed his life. When this concept of the Qur'an is enforced in Muslim society, it would truly help to change the atmosphere which is alien to Islam.

vi. Abi Abdillah Al Imam al-Husayn (as) looked at the bodies of his beloveds. Tears rolled down from his eyes due to observing the brutality. Then with full strength, like a Muazzin, he raised a clarion call thunderously on the plains of Karbala on the day of Aashurah:

"Hal Min Nasirin Yansuruna?"

Is there anyone who will come to assist us?

Is there anyone who will respond to our call for aid?

3. Who was Husayn ibn Ali (as) calling?

Certainly, the son of Fatimah was not expecting help from the Umayyad forces. Al Imam al-Husayn (as) knew well that after the Shahadah of his Ahl al-Bayt (as) and Ash'ab (ra), there will be no one left. He knew that there will be no other Hurr al-Riyahi (ra) amongst the Umayyads. The question is then for whom did he raise this call? The call was for the generation of the Muslim Ummah who were to come till Qiyamah. Sayyid-ash-Shuhada, Moula Abi Abdillah al-Husayn (as), wanted to alert every Muslim through this clarion call to fight against Yazidism which oppresses justice in each era and to raise their voices in favour of Haq. We should answer the clarion call of Al Imam al-Husayn of "Hal Min Nasirin Yansurna" in such a manner that our thoughts connect with our actions, and the lesson of Karbala reflects in our lifestyle.

The famous poet, Jafar ibn Iffaan recited a Marthiyah in the presence of Abi Abdillah Al Imam Jafar al-Sadiq (as) in remembrance of Al Imam al-Husayn (as) and the tragedy of Karbala. Tearing up, the Imam then said to the poet:

"O Iffaan! Do not think that it is only those whom you can see here that are listening to your Marthiyah. Malaek are present here at this Majlis and they are all listening and weeping upon hearing your Marthiyah. May Allah bless you for what you have recited! He will, In sha Allah, reward you with Jannah for your efforts on our behalf."

4. Insult of the sacred institution of Majlis:

i. Attending Majlis only as a family tradition or community custom without understanding its purpose and real spirit is wrong. It is shocking that we have forgotten the Majalis and Niyaz which were organized by Ahl al-Bayt (as), Aimmat (as), and Awliya, in which simple food was served. Was that not Majalis al-Husayn (as) or are we superior to them in Taqwa and Walayah? Lots of time the perceived success of Majlis depends on how good the food was, not how great the Zikr was. This is a sad state of affairs that we losing the purpose of Azadari.

ii. Like Bani Israel, we only wish to listen to sweet wordings such as Bisharah (tidings) of Jannah, irrespective of our deeds. How can this Aqidah be correct when one is drinking, enjoying interest, committing adultery and remains busy in corruption, profligacy, and licentiousness and then wishes for Shafaat, Najaat, and Jannah?

iii. Audubil'lah is Wajib before reciting Bismillah, likewise, Baraat with Shait'an is Wajib before the declaration of Wilayah. Tabarra (rejection) is an announcement of Baraat. Performing Tabarra against injustice in a manner different from our Imams is not advisable; we should therefore follow their example and not exceed the limit that the Qur'an ordains. "Ziyarah A'ashurah" is the best source to learn how to express Tabarra.

iv. Not bring any change in our actions and choices:

- a. Shed tears about the Hij'ab of Sayyidah Zaynab (as) but be without it ourselves.
- b. Praise the courage of Sayyidi Abal Fadl al-Abbas ibn Ali (as) but not stand up for the Haq (Right) of the Mazlum (oppressed).
- c. Just cry on Ali al-Akbar ibn Husayn ibn Ali (as) and Ali al-Asghar ibn Husayn ibn Ali (as) rather than following them as role models
- d. Talk about Al Imam Ali Zain al-Abideen (as) but remain engaged in materialism and take our definition of success from the media and society.

v. We Muslims often talk about the rise of Muslims and the Renaissance. Is there a true Islamic re-birth possible without any revolutionary changes taking place in the approach of the leaders themselves? Islam is not only a "Code of Life" as we often declare, but it encompasses all aspects of human activities. The real tragedy of Muslims is not that we are demoralized and our hearts are occupied, but that everybody is content to just wait for Imam al-Zaman (as) without preparing for his arrival through their own character building. Year after year, the sacrifices of the great Imam are commemorated all over the world; even the rulers participate in Marasim al-Aza (commemorating ceremonies) to pay tribute to Abi Abdillah Al Imam al-Husayn's principled stand against injustice and oppression. Yet these same rulers and leaders practice and perpetrate corruption, oppression, and injustice in their societies. It is this hypocrisy that is at the root of much of the suffering of Muslims today.

vi. Unless we can lay a very strong foundation for our children, and especially those born and bred in the West, we may find ourselves building a very hollow structure as we continue to settle around the ever loosening folds of the Majlis.

vii. The result of Majlis could be effective only when the speaker himself understands the significance of the message of the Shahadah of Moula al-Husayn (as). From the Minbar (pulpit), speakers usually are building dream castles in the air. They are not solving the difficulties of the daily life nor do they discuss the methods of solving them, but only pass time through their spiritless speeches which are usually full of myths.

viii. Topics should be selected by the speaker of the Majlis, the Bayan should be structured, and a time limit should be set so that people can pay attention. What you normally observe in lengthy Bayans is sleeping audiences, usage of mobile phones, as well as chatting and gossiping etc.

5. Lesson for those who perform the Khidmah of Al-Imam al-Husayn (as):

History repeats itself, and unfortunately, its important lessons are always forgotten. This is the account of two businessmen - one a Muslim transporter, and the other a Christian. They both came in contact with Al Imam al-Husayn (as), heard his sermons in the way to Karbala, and made a careful decision about their destiny in this world and the hereafter. Let us begin with the Muslim businessman who rented his camels and horses to Al Imam al-Husayn (as) and traveled along with him from Madinah to Karbala.

The tragedy of Karbala has distinctly shown the end result of the transporter that rented his camels and horses to Al Imam al-Husayn (as) and travelled along with Moula from Madinah to Karbala. During his travel, he listened to Imam's sermons and observed his wordings. On the day of A'ashurah, the transporter saw all the Ash'ab and male members of Ahl al-Bayt (as) help the Imam (as) and embrace Shahadah. He saw how Sayyid ush-Shuhada was left alone bleeding with numerous wounds on his body. He further saw how Moula al-Husayn (as) was switching position from fighting with the Yazidi forces on the battlefield and returning back to the tent to ensure the safety of the Sayyid'at and children in his Khaymah-Ghah. In the midst of this, the Muslim transporter went to Al Imam al-Husayn (as) and requested:

"O Aba Abdillah! This time, I don't think you will return from the battlefield, so please settle my account so that I may leave."

Al Imam al-Husayn (as) dismounted from his horse, Zuljanah, and paid him more than what was agreed for his services. The Imam (as) graciously showed him the safe passage for leaving safely out from Karbala. The point is that this transporter stayed with Al Imam al-Husayn(as), heard all his sermons and the Imam's clarion call repeatedly, the echo of which still remains:

Is there anyone who will come to assist us?

Is there anyone who will respond to our call for aid?

Alas! The unfortunate transporter did not respond to "Labbayk Ya-Husayn". This was because his objective was to only gain financially; he was with Al Imam al-Husayn (as) only for the sake of his "Dinars". This is why he did not care about Al Imam al-Husayn's divine mission and revolutionary objectives, nor for his struggle to restore "Justice" and "Humanity."

Eventually, this unfortunate transporter came out safely from the boundaries of Karbala, however, on his way he was trapped by a band of dacoits. They killed him and looted all his Dinars, camels, and horses. Al Imam al-Husayn (as) along with his Ahl al-Bayt (as) and his Ash'ab (as) were also killed but the difference between the two deaths was infinite. The materialistic transporter died a death of humiliation, while Al Imam al-Husayn (as), his Ahl al-Bayt (as) and his Ash'ab (ra) died the death of dignity and of Shahadah. The world remembers the names of the Shuhada of Karbala, though nobody remembers the name of this transporter who neglected Al Imam al-Husayn (as).

On the contrary, history bears witness to another episode which is related to Wahab ibn Abdullah Al Kalbi (ra). He was a Christian who was recently married, and was returning to his hometown with his mother and bride. On the way, they came across Al Imam al-Husayn (as). He carefully heard the Imami sermons at different places. These sermons changed his understanding and created an affinity with the Imam. Wahab al-Kalbi (ra) understood Al Imam al-Husayn's mission for Justice and Humanity. He kept on discussing this with his mother and continued with Al Imam al-Husayn's caravan till they arrived in Karbala. The situation in Karbala was very tense. Husayni Caravan was surrounded on all four sides by the forces of Yazid (L).

Everybody knew that staying with Abi Abdillah al-Husayn (as) in Karbala meant inviting death. Wahab discussed this dangerous situation with his mother. He asked her:

"What should I do in this situation?"

His mother inquired:

"How do you feel about it my son?"

Wahab replied:

"In my opinion, Husayn Ibn Ali is on the "Right Path" and it would be cowardly to leave the side of a "Just Person", so isolated and surrounded by blood-thirsty forces."

His mother argued:

"But that means definite death."

Wahab pleaded:

"I know, but my conscience tells me that this is the right action to take in these circumstances."

His mother then replied:

"If that is how you feel, then we will stay with Husayn."

When Imam's Ash'ab started leaving for the battlefield, one after the other, Wahab (ra) approached the Imam and asked his Izn (permission) to go and fight on his behalf and sacrifice his life for "Truth and Justice." The Imam knew that Wahab had just got married, so he insisted that he must leave him and seek safety with his wife and mother, but that brave son of a courageous mother did not agree. He argued:

"How is it possible for me to leave you and your dear ones in this condition? If I leave you and go away, my conscience would hurt me forever for failing to do my duty."

Moula al-Husayn (as) tried to discourage him by reminding him that this was a Muslim issue. It was an issue between an evil wicked man who claimed to be the leader of the Muslim Ummah and himself, so why should he (a Christian) get involved and get killed for something that does not concern him. Wahab (ra) spontaneously replied:

"O grandson of the Rasul (S) of Islam! If that is the case then, from this moment, I am a Muslim."

He recited Kalimah and gave Bayah to the Imam. Now Moula al-Husayn (as) gave him Izn of Jih'ad. When his bride saw that Wahab (ra) had left for the battlefield, she approached Abi Abdillah al-Husayn (as) and reconfirmed from him:

"Are you Imam al-Haq?"

Al Imam al-Husayn (as) replied in the affirmative.

Then she asked:

"If Wahab dies protecting you, would he go to Jannah?"

Imam confirmed:

Yes, he would.

Then she requested:

Can you promise me that you should not let Wahab enter Jannah without me?

The generous Son of Fatimah (as) promised:

"I promise you that you and Wahab shall enter Jannah together."

When Wahab was Shaheed, she walked towards his dead body, sat at his head and wiped the blood from it and said:

Congratulations on having earned Jannah! I plead to Allah that blessed you with Jannah to make me join you.

Far away Shimar (L) saw a woman next to Wahab's dead body. He ordered his slave to kill her. Shimar's slave hit Wahab's bride with a sword and she embraced Shahadah on the spot. This fortunate lady is the first female Shaheed of Karbala.

In both these accounts, there is Ibrat (lesson) for those who want to learn and understand. There is Talim for all of us - the transporter opted for monetary gain or worldly benefit from Karbala, and although he did receive the money, it did not benefit him. Wahab (ra), on the other hand, had a choice between joining Sayyid ush-Shuhada's camp or staying away. He had a choice between Jannah and Jahannam. Wahab opted for Jannah; he selected eternal life.

In our lifetime there are many occasions when we have to decide between good and evil, between right and wrong, between Halal and Har'am, between Jannah and Jahannam, between renting our voice for Zikr al-Husayn (as) or doing it voluntarily, between commercializing Muharram or observing it the right way. Let us become strong supporters like Wahab instead of becoming like the transporter. Let us come to Karbala to sacrifice rather than to do buisness. Let us choose good deeds, let us choose Halal over Har'am, let us stand for truth and choose to be in Jannah. Happiness and glory in this world is short-lived, while the Sadaat of A'akhirah is everlasting.

The point is that if Mumineen are doing Khidmah for the sake of worldly gains and lust of money, the end result shall be similar to that of the transporter. If, however, Mumineen are doing Khidmah solely for the sake of Al Imam al-Husayn (as) and his Daw'ah, the end result will be like that of Ash'ab al-Husayn Ibn Ali (as).

6. Upholding the Ta'lim of Husayn (as) in Every Era:

I humbly request Mumin'at that they should not show off or display their wealth through dressing extravagantly. This also helps fellow sisters to maintain dignity from having any inferiority complex. Muharram is not the only month in which Mumin'at should dress up decently but they should guard what has been ordained to be covered all year round. A woman who ignores modest dressing can not claim as being one of the slaves of Sayyidah Fatimah (as) bint Muhammed (S). Similarly, a man of questionable character can never be a true Shia of Al Imam al-Husayn (as). Only outward appearance is not enough; promise the Imam that you will refrain from that which is forbidden and act on that which is ordained by Allah. That you will do your best to not indulge in immoralities throughout the year. Many of us fail to grasp how remarkable and motivating the Zikar al-Husayn (as) is. It is an obligation upon us to inform others of the great sacrifices rendered by Moula al-Husayn (as), his Ahl al-Bayt (as) and Ash'ab (ra), and the lesson to be learnt from it.

Let us ask ourselves if we were alive at that time, would we be among those who fought alongside the Imam or from those who fought against him, and did not pay any attention to the greatest injustice perpetrated in human history? Let us ask ourselves if the son of Al Imam al-Husayn (as) comes tomorrow, are we able and worthy for him to accept us? Are Muharram and Safar simply months of mourning for us, or do we move beyond the rituals and follow the Talim and Tarbiyyah of Al Moula al-Husayn (as) and our beloved Ahl ul-Bayt?

Aza and commemoration of Aba Abdillah al-Husayn (as) is of utmost importance for our A'akhirah, but we also have the responsibility to build our nation to live in this Duniya with honor and dignity as well. The Imam did not wish for illiterate and blind followers but for highly educated and cultured supporters who could teach other nations, as his grandfather Rasulullah(S) had expressed on various occasions. A Mumin's life has to be molded in accordance with the Talim of the Imam. It is the duty of every Shia of the Imam to hold, participate and help others in their efforts in holding such meaningful Majalis. The great Imam taught humanity never to compromise with cruelty and dictatorship. By refusing to take Bayah at the hands of Yazid (L) on principles, Sayyid ush-Shuhada Abi Abdillah al-Husayn (as) taught that those who sacrifice their lives for the sake of principles remain alive and the dictators of the time lose despite their seeming victory.

Our Salaam to our Imam and our Ahd does not end at the day of A'ashurah - nor even after Arbayeen - rather, our Mis'aq continues - as long as night and day remain. We should give Mis'aq to Al Imam al-Husayn (as) that we will continue his mission of Amr bil Ma'ruf (Enjoining the good) and Nahy Anil Munkar (Forbidding evil). We maintain our Mis'aq to the Imam until we leave this world - and even beyond! May Allah allow all of us to change and understand our responsibilities towards the Daw'ah of Al Imam al-Husayn (as)! May all our Majalis be true demonstrations of our love for, and a meeting of Walayah and Mis'aq to, Al Imam al-Husayn Ibn Ali (as)! Aameen.

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