

Seerah is the answer: Justice and honesty

As I mentioned earlier, in Makkah, the rules were different for the rule makers and the general population. This was and continues to be the norm in the world, to this day. Different strokes for different folks. Then came Islam which turned this system on its head and declared that justice means to apply the same rule to everyone. Allah ﷻ ordered:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ بِالْقِسْطِ شُهَدَاءَ لِلَّهِ وَلَوْ عَلَىٰ
أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَوِ الْوَالِدِينَ وَالْأَقْرَبِينَ إِن يَكُنْ غَنِيًّا أَوْ فَقِيرًا فَاللَّهُ أَوْلَىٰ
بِهِمَا فَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا الْهَوَىٰ أَنْ تَعْدِلُوا وَإِن تَلُؤْأُوا أَوْ تُعْرِضُوا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ
كَانَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرًا

Nisa 4: 135. *O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even though it be against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, be he rich or poor, Allah is a Better Protector to both (than you). So, follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest you may avoid justice, and if you distort your witness or refuse to give it, verily, Allah is Ever Well-Acquainted with what you do.*

Allah ﷻ called this 'standing out for justice as witnesses to Allah ﷻ.' Allah ﷻ didn't exempt anyone from the Law and specifically named the closest relationships we have so that there is no doubt in anyone's mind.

Rasoolullah ﷺ said:

Anas ibn Malik (RA) reported: Rasoolullah ﷺ said, "Support your brother whether he is an oppressor or is being oppressed." They asked, "Ya Rasoolullah ﷺ, we help the one being oppressed but how do we help an oppressor?" Rasoolullah ﷺ said, "By seizing his hand." In another narration, Rasoolullah ﷺ is reported to have said, "By restraining him or preventing him from committing injustice, for that is how you support him."

[Source: Şaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 2312, Şaḥīḥ Muslim 2584, Muttafaqun Alaihi (Agreed upon).]

By tribal rules of loyalty, people supported their tribe members irrespective of whether they were right or not. Rasoolullah ﷺ used that principle and idiom to drive home the point that support must be for what is just, no matter who needs that support. And that the way to support your own brother, is to stop him from being unjust and oppressing others.

Having said that, supporting the truth was not entirely absent as a principle among the Makkan people. There is a famous incident in the Seerah where a Yemeni merchant from Zabid had sold some goods to a notable member of the clan of Sahm. Having taken possession of the goods, the man from Sahm refused to pay the agreed price. The wrong doer knew very well that the merchant had no friends or kinsmen in Mecca, whom he could count upon for help. But the merchant, instead of letting it pass, appealed to the Quraysh to ensure that justice was done. In response to his call, a meeting was hosted at the house of Abdullah ibn Jada'an. At the meeting, various chiefs and members of tribes pledged to respect the principles of justice, and to collectively intervene in conflicts to establish justice.

To make the pact imperative and sacred, the members went to the Ka'aba and poured water, so it flowed over Al Hajar ul Aswad, into the receptacle. Then each man drank from it. Then they raised their right hands above their heads to show they would stand together in this endeavor. The pact was written and placed inside the Ka'aba, the place where the participants believed it would be under the protection of God. This pact was called Al Hilf-ul-Fudhul (League of the Virtuous).

Muhammad ﷺ is reported to have been about 20 years old at the time and lived with his uncle, Abu Talib who took him to this meeting. It is not known if he was a formal signatory to the pact or not but he was so impressed with it that many years later in Madina, he said, 'If anyone were to ask for my intervention, invoking Al Hilf-ul-Fudhul, I would honor that and help him.' Muhammad ﷺ still acknowledged the validity and value of the pact, despite the members having been non-Muslim. That pact also marked the presence of some notion of justice in Makkah, which would be later supported by Muhammad ﷺ when he would preach Islam. Muhammad ﷺ lived by

and applied this principle of justice throughout his life as did those who followed him in Ihsaan (Excellence).

There are many instances in the Seerah which show that Rasoolullah ﷺ didn't hold himself and his family apart from the principle of justice, nor did he claim to be above it. This was not only in contrast to the global principle of the time, where rulers and nobility were not subject to the same laws as the general public, but it contrasts with the present-day sometimes stated but always practiced principle of treating the rich and powerful differently from ordinary people. This non-partisan, objective and impartial application of the law is what sets Islam apart and is something we need to re-establish. Let me narrate four famous stories about how the principle of justice was upheld by Rasoolullah ﷺ and by those who followed him.

Narrated 'Aisha (Radi-Allahu 'anha): The people of Quraysh worried about a lady from Bani Makhzum who had committed theft. They asked, "Who will intercede for her with Rasoolullah ﷺ?" Some said, "No one can dare to do so except Usama bin Zaid the beloved one of Rasoolullah ﷺ."

When Usama (RA) spoke about the matter to Rasoolullah ﷺ, he said, (to him), "Do you try to intercede for somebody in a case connected with Allah ﷻ's Prescribed Punishments?" Then he got up and delivered a sermon saying, "What destroyed the nations preceding you was that if a noble amongst them stole, they would forgive him, and if a poor person amongst them stole, they would inflict Allah ﷻ's Legal punishment on him.

By Allah ﷻ, if Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad stole, I would cut off her hand."

[Bukhari Vol. 4 : No. 681]

Another famous example of Islam's justice is in the story of the renowned Qadi Shuraih ibn al-Hârith ibn Qays ibn al-Jahm al-Kindî. He accepted Islam in Yemen during the lifetime of Rasoolullah ﷺ though he never met him. He relocated to Kufa in Iraq during the reign of Abû Bakr al-Siddîq (RA). He served as a judge there, succeeding Abdullah ibn Masood (RA), and was renowned for his justice and good judgement. It

is said that he spent sixty years in that office. He also served as a judge in Basra for a year.

There is a famous incident that is narrated about how Shuraih was appointed as the Qadi of Kufa. Umar ibn al Khattab (RA) purchased a horse on approval and gave it to somebody to try it. The horse got hurt in the ride, and Umar ibn al Khattab (RA) wanted to return it, but the owner refused to take it back. Shuraih was chosen as the arbitrator to resolve the dispute. His verdict was that if the horse was ridden with the permission of the owner it could be returned, otherwise not. The decision was against Umar ibn al Khattab (RA) but he immediately conceded it was the right decision and appointed Shuraih as the Qadi of Kufa.

Another well-known incident records Ali bin Abi Talib (RA)'s shield allegedly being stolen. Ali (RA) recognized his shield when he saw it in the possession of a Jew. He instituted a claim in the court of Qadi Shuraih who asked that Ali (RA) produce his witnesses to prove his claim. Ali (RA) presented his son Hasan (RA) and then his freed slave. Qadi Shuraih declared that the testimony of a son in favor of his father or an emancipated slave was not admissible, hence he ordered Ali (RA) to present another witness. When Ali (RA) was unable to do so, Qadi Shuraih dismissed his claim to the shield. Ali (RA), who was the Khalifa of the time, accepted the judgment against himself and emerged from the court cheerfully. On seeing this high degree of justice where the leader of the Muslim world could lose a case in the face of a just ruling, the man recited the Kalima and embraced Islam. He later presented the shield to Ali (RA) saying that he had picked up the shield after it had apparently fallen off Ali (RA)'s mount, unnoticed by him. Ali (RA) responded, "You can keep it as my gift". Thereafter, the man remained perpetually in the company of Ali (RA) and was martyred in the battle of Siffeen.

The third story is about Sayyidina Umar ibn al Khattab (RA) who, as was his habit, disguised himself and went with his companion Ibn Abbas (RA) to see the condition of the people. As they were passing by a small house in a poor neighborhood, the Khalifa overheard a conversation. The mother was telling her daughter that the amount of milk fetched by her for sale that day was very little. She told her that when she was young, and used to sell milk, she always mixed water with milk, and that led

to considerable profit. She told her daughter to do the same. The girl said, "You adulterated milk, when you were not a Muslim. Now that we are Muslims, we cannot adulterate milk." The mother said that Islam did not stand in the way of adulteration of milk. The daughter said, "Have you forgotten the Khalifa's order?

He ordered that milk should not be adulterated." The mother said, "But the Khalifa has forgotten us. We are so poor, what else should we do but adulterate milk in order to buy bread?" The daughter said, "Such bread would not be lawful, and as a Muslim I would not do anything which is against the orders of the Khalifa, and whereby other people are deceived."

The mother said, "But there is neither the Khalifa nor any of his officers here to see what we do. Daughter you are still a child. Go to bed now and tomorrow I will myself mix the milk with water for you." The girl refused to fall in with the plan of her mother. She said, "The Khalifa may not be here, but his order must be obeyed. My conscience is my Khalifa. You may escape the notice of the Khalifa and his officers, but how can we escape the notice of Allah ﷻ and our own conscience?" Thereupon the mother fell silent. The lamp was extinguished, and the mother and the daughter went to sleep.

The next day, Umar ibn al Khattab (RA) sent a man to purchase milk from the girl. The milk was unadulterated. The girl had kept her resolve. Umar ibn al Khattab (RA) turned to his companion and said, "The girl has kept her resolve despite pressure from her mother. She deserves a reward. What reward should I give her?" "She should be paid some money," said Ibn Abbas (RA). The Khalifa summoned the daughter and the mother to his court. The mother trembled as she stood before the ruler. But the girl faced the Khalifa boldly and with great equanimity. Then before the gathering, Umar ibn al Khattab (RA) related how he had overheard the mother and the daughter, and how despite the pressure from her mother the daughter had kept her resolve.

Someone suggested that the mother should be taken to task. The Khalifa said that ordinarily he would have punished the mother, but he had forgiven her for the sake of her daughter. Umar ibn al Khattab (RA) asked the girl if she would be willing to become his daughter, meaning if she would marry one of his sons. She remained

silent, which is a sign of agreement. He then called his sons, and said, "Here is a gem of a girl who would make a great mother. I desire that one of you should take this girl as wife. I know of no better bride than this girl of sterling character. In matters of marriage, it should be the character and not the stature in life that should count." Abdullah and Abdur Rahman the elder sons of the Khalifa were already married.

Asim, the third son was yet unmarried, and he offered to marry the girl, if she agreed to accept him. Thereupon with the consent of the milkmaid and her mother Asim was married to the girl, and the milkmaid became the daughter-in-law of the Khalifa. From this union was born a daughter Umm Asim, who became in due course the mother of Umar bin Abdul Aziz, who was elected as Khalifa after the demise of Abdul Malik bin Marwan and served for a short period from 717-720 AD.

The purpose of narrating these well-known stories from the Seerah and lives of the Sahaba is to show that the values inculcated by Rasoolullah ﷺ had taken deep root in society. It was not only the leaders, the learned and powerful who lived by them, but also the general population. For those who may think that all this is too utopian and unrealistic in today's times, let me give you three modern examples. This will prove that it is possible if we wish to do it.

1. In South Africa under Apartheid rule, Muslims appearing in court as witnesses were not required to take an oath to speak the truth, because it was believed and stated that Muslims don't lie. It is worthy of note that the government was strongly religious Christian (Dutch Reformed Church) and the decision to exempt Muslims from taking an oath to speak the truth was taken by them unilaterally after observing the character of Muslims in general.
2. Second example is from Australia where I saw a grocery store in Perth without any checkout tills. There was a key pad on the wall where you entered what you had bought and the price, as mentioned on the tag of the item. Then you swipe your card and walk away. I asked a friend who was with me, 'What if I buy two kilos of grapes and punch in only one kilo?' He said, 'It will give you the bill for one kilo.' Surprised, I asked him, 'So I can just walk away without paying for my purchases?' He said, 'Yes.' I asked him, 'How is this store still in business?' He said, 'Because

people are honest and pay for what they buy.’ It was like a wake-up call to me to say that people are honest even today.

3. The third is an example from Japan and it may well be true in other countries where people board a bus and pay by dropping coins into a box equal to the fare to their destination. Here again, nobody is watching. They just do the right thing, though if they didn’t or even if they didn’t pay at all, nothing would happen.

Islam doesn’t just leave justice and honesty as a value to be quietly and silently espoused. It demands that we stand up for it. Rasoolullah ﷺ’s two Ahadith show this:

On the authority of Abu Sa’eed al-Khudree (RA) who said: I heard Rasoolullah ﷺ say, *"Whosoever of you sees an evil, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then [let him change it] with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart — and that is the weakest of faith."* [Muslim]

Rasoolullah ﷺ is related to have said, *"Verily, from the greatest of Jihad is a word of Truth in the presence of a tyrannical ruler."*

It is these teachings of the Quran and Hadith that gave rise to several great scholars who revolted against tyrants despite torture, imprisonment and death in the most gruesome of ways.

Justice and honesty are possible even today. What Islam propagates is not some impossible utopian dream, but a very practical approach to life, rooted in living consciously.

Now that we have learnt from the Seerah, let us reflect on our activities, habits, preferences, likes and dislikes and see if they reflect us as people who are just or unjust? You may also like to also do this with your family.

Then go to the Action Plan page and write in what you need to start doing, stop doing and continue doing. Try to be as specific as possible because that will help you to monitor your success after you start applying the new ways. Then list the Inhibitors and Enablers for each one. What are the things, habits, conditions, people and situations, which are likely to inhibit you from Starting, Stopping or Continuing that

activity? And what are the things, habits, conditions, people and situations which are likely to help and enable you to succeed? The more specific you are the better.

Action Plan

Start: What are the attitudes, behaviors, habits that I need to **start** in order to make the switch in my dealings to 'Justice for All'?

Stop: What are the attitudes, behaviors, habits that I do now but need to **stop** in order to make the switch in my dealings to 'Justice for All'?

Continue: What are the attitudes, behaviors, habits that I do at present, which I need to **consciously continue** to do in order to make the switch in my dealings to 'Justice for All'?