

Arba‘īn: the Mi‘rāj of a Mourner

The following reflection expresses the depth of the spiritual walk from Najaf to Karbala on Arba‘īn. These personal expressions of sacrifice serve as crucial landmarks in a believer’s journey to become proximate to God (swt) through devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt, particularly Imam Husayn (‘a).

From a well-known narration by Imam Hasan al-‘Askarī (‘a) delineating the five signs of a believer, the one recalled foremost is to perform *ziyārah* of Imam Husayn (‘a) on the 40th day following his martyrdom, known as Arba‘īn. ((Al-Majlisi, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 98, pg. 329.)) This day is also significant for reportedly being the first time Imam ‘Ali Zayn al-‘Ābidīn (‘a) and Lady Zaynab (‘a) along with the other captives returned to Karbala to perform *ziyārah* of the martyrs. The difference between reading these accounts and acting on them by being physically present in Karbala on the day of Arba‘īn is the difference between theoretical and practical knowledge, the difference between knowing and doing. The annual commemoration of Arba‘īn in Karbala is more than a mere page of recitation from the *Mafatīḥ al-Jinān*; it is an entire volume of sensory expressions of love for Imam Husayn (‘a). Those who have been privileged to participate know and understand this. Those who have not yet had the opportunity to partake in this honor can only imagine. Arba‘īn is a veritable journey of the heart that can be called the *mi‘rāj*, or spiritual ascension, of a mourner.

Although I had already performed *ziyārah* in Iraq and had some idea of what to expect, Arba‘īn was a *ziyārah* on an entirely different level. Upon arrival in Iraq, we were immediately faced with repeated delays, as though Allah (swt) wanted to further purify us, testing our patience and the extent of discomfort we were willing to embrace for the chance to kiss the shrine of our Imam (‘a). No amount of research could prepare me for the sheer number of people gravitating toward the Prince of Martyrs—Sayyid al-Shuhadā’ (‘a)—for Arba‘īn from all over the

globe. We first went to Najaf to pledge our love and allegiance to the Commander of the Faithful, Imam ‘Ali (‘a). However, amid the millions of bodies and feet, finding even three square feet to pray was a struggle. This was not the leisurely *ziyārah* of my past; this was a glimpse of the future, of the Day of Judgment when everyone will be begging for Imam ‘Ali’s (‘a) intercession in Allah’s (swt) court. Acknowledging my own insignificance in the presence of the brother (‘a) of the Best of Creation (s) was at once awe-inspiring and ego-deflating, a necessary ablution for proceeding on this path.

Our few days in Najaf flew by, and the time came for shifting the qiblah of our hearts to Karbala, to Abū ‘Abd Allah al-Husayn (‘a). I had heard tales of the miraculous nature of this walk, and as I set out to unearth its secret, I discovered it in plain sight. Everywhere I looked, I would see a manifestation of Love. Mourners of all ages and races marching to the same beat, the beat upon and within their hearts that throbbed the name “Husayn”. The Iraqi hosts and their immeasurable hospitality, giving anything and everything without hesitation to the visitors of Imam Husayn (‘a). Even the very dust at our feet billowed and settled on our clothes, as though it too wanted to serve us, by covering us with that divinely-promised intercession for the sake of Imam Husayn (‘a). I have never seen a love this tangible, pervading everything. Just as congregational prayers multiply the rewards of a single prayer, millions of souls ardently seeking a sole beloved multiplied the love exponentially, until it completely encompassed us in layers of brotherhood and security. We were not individuals on that Walk; we had merged into a single black-clad, moving mass that only knew Husayn and hastened towards him.



Walking 50 miles over two or three days affords plenty of time to reflect, and there is plenty to reflect upon. I was touched by the eagerness of young children, the elderly, and even the disabled to serve the pilgrims—echoes through time of the loyalty and passion for Imam Husayn (‘a), first demonstrated by the elite 72. I was grieved to recall Lady Zaynab (‘a) and the first pilgrims on this same path centuries ago, to compare the circumstances in which they traveled to the freedom and relative luxury of our wayfaring. I was humbled by the kindness of hosts, by the faith of strangers, by the ailing woman in a *mawkib* who painstakingly made her way to me, to plead for a prayer for her health, sincere in her belief that a sayyid’s prayers held greater sway with Allah (swt). I was struck by the ubiquitous images of martyrs, taped on poles and pinned with pride to family members’ bags—a distant possibility to those of us living in the West, but a definite reminder that every one of us will taste death; and blessed are those who will find it honey-sweet. And then there were the recurring reminders of Imam Mahdi (‘a), the unseen imam of this mobile congregation. Many pilgrims wore signs pledging every one of their steps to his

Reappearance. I have no doubt that these incalculable steps of millions did in fact move us closer to the dawn of Reappearance. However, I felt ashamed to think of how little we are prepared, and how content we are with the darkness of the night. Just as out of love for Imam Husayn (‘a), we took action and began walking towards him, getting closer and closer with each step, we need to do the same to affirm our love for Imam Mahdi (‘a), and take active steps to move closer to him. The number of miles walked or poles crossed began to lose all meaning as I lost myself in the depths of this Walk.

Several prayers and reflections later, the moment came when we reached Karbala and beheld the glorious shrine of Abū al-Faḍl al-‘Abbas (‘a). The beauty of that moment is such that you forget all your blisters and cramps, and the tears you shed completely energize and revive you. Such is the suffusing strength of the Standard-Bearer (‘a) that even Death is powerless to restrain it. Now that we were so close to our goal, I became restless to reach the shrine (*ḥaram*) of Imam Husayn (‘a). After stopping briefly at the hotel to drop off my bag, I continued onwards to the *ḥaram* of Abū al-Faḍl al-‘Abbas (‘a). Unaccustomed to the physical exertion of the past couple days, I was audibly whimpering with every step my right leg took, but my ears could not hear because my heart’s cry of “Labbayk Ya Husayn” was so much louder. I entered Abū al-Faḍl al-‘Abbas’ (‘a) shrine in time for Fajr prayer. In this short prayer, we recited Du‘a al-Faraj three times—first between *aḏān* and *iqāmah*, then in *qunūt*, and after the final *salām*. As everyone chimed in the recitation, the words would reverberate throughout the *ḥaram*; it seemed as though Abū al-Faḍl al-‘Abbas (‘a) himself were exhorting us to always be faithful to the Imam of our time, just as he had been to the Imam of his time. I pledged my servitude and turned my broken heart and body to face the mecca of Karbala. Bayn al-Ḥaramayn was a black sea of tears, yet the Captain of Salvation (‘a) who had been with me since I set off on this course expertly guided me into his shrine, to the winding, clamoring line which would ultimately lead to him. Minutes turned into an hour, and as the crowd inched forward, my mind raced backward with recollections of that tragic day. I desperately tried to gather my thoughts and prepare for the treasured few seconds I would be granted to connect with my

beloved Imam (‘a).

At last, that long-awaited moment arrived when I was finally pressed against the blessed *ḍarīḥ*. Gone from my mind were the lists of wishes and prayers for family and friends. Gone were the crowds crushing from all sides. At that final moment of union, it was only Imam Husayn (‘a) and me, in the presence of Allah (swt), in heaven on earth. All my Muharrams had culminated in this honor, and then time stopped as I stood suspended between sorrow and hope. With my fingers laced in the *ḍarīḥ*, I looked up with blurred eyes into the glittering dome “under which answers to supplications are guaranteed,” and called out aloud to Imam Mahdi (‘a), begging Allah (swt) to hasten his return. The prayer ascended, and I was pulled away by the keepers of the shrine.

The physical journey came to an end, but this Arba‘īn *ziyārah* continues to linger in my mind. I pray it stays with me for an eternity, because so long as the memory remains, the motivation for improving myself and performing greater acts of worship will also remain. Prophet Muhammad (ṣ) said, “Prayer is the *mi‘rāj* of a believer.” Through private conversation with our Creator (swt), we have the potential to elevate our worship and spiritual state. Likewise, for one who weeps over Imam Husayn (‘a), visiting him on the day of Arba‘īn has the potential to elevate our connection with him, and in turn raise our rank with Allah (swt). *Ziyārah* truly is a journey of love with the power to transform us, to polish us into a better version of ourselves, so that, upon our return, we can reflect the light of our Imams (‘a) wherever we go. However, other people’s stories cannot do Arba‘īn justice. This is a journey that everyone needs to make for themselves. May Allah accept our efforts and grant us the opportunity to visit those sacred lands and holy personalities (‘a) time and time again.

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