

Motherhood in Islam

Session Three

From the Holy Qur'an

69. *And verily, there came Our Messengers to Ibrâhîm (Abraham) with glad tidings. They said: Salâm (greetings or peace!) He answered, Salâm (greetings or peace!) and he hastened to entertain them with a roasted calf.*

70. *But when he saw their hands went not towards it (the meal), he felt some mistrust of them, and conceived a fear of them. They said: "Fear not, we have been sent against the people of Lut."*

71. *And his wife was standing (there), and she laughed. But We gave her glad tidings of Ishâq (Isaac), and after him, of Ya'qûb (Jacob).*

72. *She said (in astonishment): "Woe unto me! Shall I bear a child while I am an old woman, and here is my husband, an old man? Verily! This is a strange thing!"*

73. *They said: "Do you wonder at the Decree of Allâh? The Mercy of Allâh and His Blessings be on you, O the family [of Ibrâhîm (Abraham)]. Surely, He (Allâh) is All-Praiseworthy, All-Glorious." (Sura Hud, Verse 69-75)*

Islamic Rituals at the time of Birth

The birth of a human being is a very special occasion. Islam has prescribed certain rituals and ceremonies that are recommended at that time. These rituals carry a lot of significance and have been prescribed for the following reasons:

- a). To show the importance of the human being who has now entered the world and is part of society. Entry into society is a significant event, and is supposed to be heralded with deserving attention, just as departure from society at the time of death is also accompanied by rites and rituals.
- b) To allow the parents to show their love and commitment to the child right from the time of birth. These rituals remind the parent that their duty is beginning, and they now have to focus on doing what is right for their child.
- c) To benefit the child, both spiritually and physically. All the rites prescribed at the time of birth have immense advantages for the child. It lays the ground for good health, physical strength, as well as a spiritual and meaningful environment for the child.

Some of the recommended rituals are:

1. Accepting and welcoming the new baby

The first thing parents are supposed to do is to welcome and accept the baby, be it male or female. Sometimes parents set their heart on a particular gender, or have high expectations of beauty. When the child is different from what they had expected or hoped, they are disappointed. A hadith of Imam Zaynul Abidin (a) says: *when I get news of the birth of my child, I do not ask if it is male or female. I ask if it is healthy and whole, then I thank the Almighty if it is.* The child is a gift from the Almighty, and its arrival should be accepted with gratitude and joy.

2. Congratulating the parents and praying for the new baby

It is recommended that believers extend warm greetings and congratulations to the parents and family of the new baby. It is a special event for them and the society shares in their joy.

Islamic etiquette includes praying for the child. Believers pray that the child becomes a source of happiness for the parents, is pious and virtuous, etc. Prayers should be appropriate. During the time of Imam Ali (a), a man came to him with the news of a birth in his family. Another man present congratulated him and prayed that the child would become a swift horse rider. Imam Ali (a) told him, *“Don’t say that. Rather, say: I thank the One who granted, may the child be blessed for you. May he reach maturity and be a source of goodness for you.”*

3. Reciting Adhan and Iqamah

It is recommended that Adhan should be recited in the right ear of the child, and Iqamah in the left ear. A hadith of Imam Hasan (a) says that this keeps the child safe from the evil of Shaytan.

According to scholars, the reason for reciting Adhan and Iqamah is that the first sounds a child should hear upon entering this world, are the sounds which declare the greatness of the Almighty and witness His Oneness. He becomes acquainted with the slogan of Unity of God at the time of birth, and is reminded of this at the time of his death. The recitations are in accordance with the Fitrat of the human being, and human nature is ready to accept it.

4. Tahneek

It is recommended that a small piece of date, or something sweet, should be softened completely, and very gently rubbed on the palate (roof of the mouth) of the child. It is greatly recommended that the person giving this to the baby possesses qualities of piety and virtue. He should pray for the child.

It is also recommended to use water of Euphrates for Tahneek. A hadith says: *One who is given Tahneek of the water of Furat, cannot but love us Ahlul Bayt (a)*

5. Shaving the head

It is recommended that on the seventh day after birth, the head of the baby is shaved. The hair is then weighed, and the weight of it in silver is given in charity. This act has two benefits:

- a) It removes the hair from the womb and has implication for the health of the child. It cleanses the child’s head and strengthens it for future growth.
- b) It helps the poor in society who will receive the charity.

The Holy Prophet (s) carried out this rite with his grandchildren, and told believers they should do the same. It is not recommended to remove only part of the hair.

6. Naming the Child

One of the first duties of parents is to give the child a good and worthy name. The following points have to be remembered in carrying out this important duty:

a) Parents should name the child before it is born. A hadith of Imam Ali (a) says: *Name your children before they are born, and if you don't know if it is a male or female, name it with a name that can be for either. If it dies before birth, and you did not name the child, it will meet you on the day of Judgement and ask why you did not name it. The Prophet (s) had named Muhsin before he was born.* The name can later be changed, preferably on the seventh day after birth.

b) The parents should choose a good name for the child, based on certain virtuous qualities, or noble personalities who have had that name. The Holy Prophet (s) has said: *The first good act that a parent does for his child is to name it with a good name, so you should strive to choose good names for your child.* He also says: *Make your names good, for you will be called by them on the day of Judgement.*

c) Do not choose names that are inappropriate. These include qualities not valued in Islam, or names that are prevalent in society but are not Muslim names. Children should also not be named after qualities of the Almighty.

d) The child should be called by the name he is given. Islam does not like adaptations of names, or nicknames. The Holy Qur'an says: *And do not call one another by nicknames.* . (49:11)

e) It is recommended to have one child in the family named after the Ahlul Bayt (a). A hadith of the Prophet (s) says, *Whoever has four sons, and does not name anyone of them after me, has done injustice to me.*

7. Aqiqah

Another highly recommended ritual after the birth of a child is Aqiqah, or the sacrifice of an animal. This is done on the seventh day after the birth of a child. A hadith of Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a) says: *[A child] is named on the seventh day, a sacrifice is made, his hair is shaved and the weight of it in silver is given in charity. The meat is sent to the nurse, others are fed with it, and it is given in charity.*

Sacrificing an animal and feeding the poor with the meat carries a lot of reward. It is an act of worship to bring one closer to Allah. It is an act of charity and helps to strengthen the bonds in society. It also keeps away difficulties and evil from the child. Aqiqah is so highly recommended that if it is not done at the time of birth, it should be done later. Even an adult who realizes that Aqiqah was not done for him, can have it done at that time. In fact if Aqiqah was not done during the lifetime of someone, it is even recommended to do it after his death.

8. Circumcision

It is wajib to circumcise a male child. It should be done on the seventh day, or even before. Since it is obligatory, it can even be done later if it was not done at the time of birth. Circumcision protects health, and is conducive to good hygiene and growth. A hadith of the Holy Prophet (s) says: *Purify your sons on the seventh day, for it is purer for them, and better, and more conducive to growth of the flesh, surely the earth does not*

like the urine of one who has not been circumcised. Specific supplications are recommended at the time of circumcision.

Breastfeeding the Child

The mothers shall give suck to their children for two whole years, (that is) for those (parents) who desire to complete the term of suckling, but the father of the child shall bear the cost of the mother's food and clothing on a reasonable basis. No person shall have a burden laid on him greater than he can bear. No mother shall be treated unfairly on account of her child, nor father on account of his child. And on the (father's) heir is incumbent the like of that (which was incumbent on the father). If they both decide on weaning, by mutual consent, and after due consultation, there is no sin on them. And if you decide on a foster suckling-mother for your children, there is no sin on you, provided you pay (the mother) what you agreed (to give her) on reasonable basis. And fear Allâh and know that Allâh is All-Seer of what you do. (2:233)

Breast milk is undoubtedly the best type of milk for the baby. It is a sign of the beauty and wisdom of Allah's creation that a mother's breasts begin to produce milk before the baby is even born. He has equipped the woman with the bodily organs she needs for breastfeeding, and created her in such a way that the milk she produces is ideal for the needs of her child. It is thus the responsibility of the woman to carry out the role intended for her.

In Hadithe Mufazzal, Imam Ja'far –as-Sadiq (a) says: *With the birth of the infant, the menstrual flow which served as nutrition in the womb is diverted to the mother's breast. Its taste is altered, as well as its color, and it becomes a nutrient of quite a different kind, which exactly suits the temperament of the infant, as and when it needs the same . . . he gets its nutrition from milk in this way so long as his body remains delicate, his organs and bowels soft and weak.* Another Hadith says: *There is nothing better for a child than its mother's milk.* It is for this reason that Islam says that a woman can be paid for breastfeeding her child if she demands.

The numerous benefits of breastfeeding are acknowledged by all scholars. Some of these include:

1. The baby enjoys relatively good health as breast milk gives the child a form of immunity, and stimulates the production of antibodies in the child.
2. Breast milk is easier to digest and is quickly assimilated.
3. There is no fear of allergic reactions as this is the most natural food available for the baby.
4. Breast milk has the exact ingredients and chemicals that a baby requires.
5. The close contact that is created between the mother and child during breastfeeding has a lot of emotional gratification. It fulfills the need of touch and affection in the child and creates a feeling of pleasure and contentment.

The mother also benefits from breastfeeding. According to some scholars, breastfeeding creates maternal fulfillment and satisfaction. It also has physical benefits such as

regaining her figure quicker, and allows her to rest during breastfeeding and enjoy her baby more.

If mothers are not able to feed their babies, they should at least try to hold the baby close as they feed from the bottle. This is necessary for the baby's emotional and psychological growth. Islam also allows the practice of getting another woman to breastfeed the child. This foster mother should be chosen with great care for breast milk has an effect on the child. It is recommended that the foster mother should have faith and good character.

Feeding the Body and Soul

The childhood of a human being is longer than that of any other living creature. Some animals do not have any period of childhood, while others have a very short one. But humans are dependent on their parents or other adults in their lives for a considerably longer period. Physical growth progresses very gradually, and mental and psychological maturity also takes time to appear. According to Islamic scholars, this prolonged period of childhood in humans is because of their need for learning and training. Animals learn most of what is necessary for them from the instinct that God has given them. Humans however, need more as their life has a much higher purpose. As parents feed their children for optimum physical growth, they must remember that they are also responsible for feeding the minds and souls of their children. The lap of the mother has been described as the first Madrasah of the child, and this period is an opportunity for establishing the base of sound mental and spiritual growth.

Almighty Allah says in the Holy Qur'an: *Let the human being look at his food.* (21:8) This verse refers to food for the body as well as for the soul. A hadith of Imam Ali (a) says: *Why is it that I see that when food is brought before mankind at night, they bring the light closer to it so they can see what enters their stomachs, and they do not give [a similar] importance to the food of the soul.* Another hadith says: *I am surprised at the one who thinks about what his body eats, how he cannot think about what his mind feeds on, so he is cautious about what may harm his stomach, but leaves his chest to take in what may destroy him.*

One who is denied of knowledge and wisdom, is actually deprived of spiritual food. The mind and soul of a human being have two openings; the eye and the ear. All facts, opinions, thoughts etc. enter a human being through these two ways. Just as bacteria and disease enter the human being through food and drink, dangerous and misleading thoughts and opinions enter the mind of the human being. He should have the inner health to be able to fight off this danger. The spiritual nourishment a child receives should form a strong inner base from which such dangers can be fought. Just as parents take a lot of time and effort to provide good nourishing food for the physical growth of the child, they should also strive to provide nourishment for the mind and soul.