

A Duty to Help

Imam Ali was walking on the streets of Kufa. He saw a woman walking on the other side of the road. She was carrying a heavy water bag on her back. He came forward. 'Can I help you carry this?' he asked. 'It seems too heavy for you'. The woman was pleased. He took the water bag from her and walked with her to her home.

On the way he asked about her family. 'Ali bin Abu Talib sent my husband to the battle where he died' she said. 'Now I am alone with my children and I have to work hard to support them'. Imam listened quietly to her story. It saddened him. They reached her home and Imam placed the water bag on the ground.

Imam returned home but could not forget the woman and her sad story. She needed help. In the morning, he took a basket, put some meat, flour and dates in it and set out for the woman's house. Along the way he met some of his companions. 'Allow us to carry the basket for you,' they said. 'It looks heavy.' But Imam refused. 'I will carry it myself' he said. '

Reaching the woman's house, he knocked at the door. 'Who is it?' said the woman. 'I am the man who carried the water bag for you. Now I have brought some food for the children.' He replied. The woman was pleased. 'May Allah bless you' she said happily.

'I wish to be of help' said the Imam. 'Allow me either to bake the bread or look after the children'. The woman looked at her children. 'You play with them outside' she said, 'I will bake the bread.

Imam Ali played with the children. They ran around outside, laughing loudly. They were having fun.

After a while another woman passed by. She stared at the man who was playing with the children. She was so surprised, her mouth fell open. 'Salaam alaykum, O Amir ul Mu'mineen,' she said respectfully. She went to the woman inside. 'Do you not recognize this man?' she asked.

The woman of the house was puzzled. 'No,' she said. 'Do you know him? He has been very helpful.' 'Of course I know him' said the neighbor. 'He is Ali bin Abu Talib, Amir ul Mumineen, the Chief of the believers'. The woman could not believe her ears. How could she not have known? Red faced she came forward, 'I beg your pardon, O Amir ul Mu'mineen. I had no idea it was you. Please do forgive me'. 'No' said the Imam. 'It was my duty to help you.'

Source: - Biharul Anwar, Vol. 41, pg 52

Two Travelers

One day two men were traveling on the same road. Since they were riding their horses on a narrow road they started chatting. Time seemed to go by fast.

‘Where are you going?’ asked the first man. ‘I myself am going to a small village outside of Kufa where I live’.

‘I am going to Kufa’ replied the other man. ‘That is where my home is.’

Soon they were close to Kufa. They could see the white buildings from far. The sun was shining and they could see birds flying overhead.

The first man pulled his reins to stop his horse. The horse neighed softly as the man guided him gently towards the other side of the road. He would take the road outside Kufa towards his village. He turned to say goodbye. To his surprise, he saw that the other man was still riding. He was coming with him.

‘Didn't you tell me that you are going to Kufa where you lived?’ he asked in surprise.

The man smiled. ‘Yes, I do live in Kufa and that’s where I am going’.

This was even more confusing ‘Then why are you still with me? You should continue on the road towards Kufa.’

‘I know’ said the man. ‘I will go soon. I am only coming with you for a while. Our Prophet taught us that when two people are together on a journey, they have rights towards one another. You gave me company and it your right that I should come with you a few steps after I reach where I am going. I can’t just leave you as soon I arrive home.’

The man was amazed. He had never heard of such noble manners before. ‘Thank you’ he said. His heart felt warm. He felt respected.

It was only later, when he visited Kufa, that he found out that the man who had traveled with him was Ali, the cousin and son in law of the Prophet.

Source: Mahajjatul Baydha, vol 3

Figs and Honey

The news spread fast in Kufa. Imam Ali had received large amounts of figs and honey from the people of Hamadan as a gift. People knew he never kept anything for himself. They came out from their homes, bringing their cups, and pots, and bags, and whatever they had. They wanted a share of the delicious stuff from Hamadan.

Imam came towards the group of people that had gathered. 'I will give you what you want' he said. 'But you must wait'.

He turned to his friends. 'Call the children' he told them. People looked at each other. What was Imam doing? 'Call all the needy children of Kufa' he said again.

Soon groups of children came running. They jumped and they hopped. They skipped towards the Imam. His smiling face showed love and happiness at seeing them. He pointed toward the bags of figs and containers of honey. 'Take and eat as much as you want' he told them. Imam sat with them, helping them to eat.

The children were delighted. Sounds of laughter filled the streets as the children ate from the figs and honey and took some aside for themselves. The figs were so soft and ripe. Purple juice stained their hands and mouths. They loved the golden honey of Hamadan that had such a special taste. It was such a treat.

The adults looked on waiting for their turn. When the children were done eating Imam divided the remaining figs and honey between the people. One of them objected; 'Why were the children able to get all they wanted, and you even fed them figs and honey yourself, but when it is our turn you decide to divide equally?'

Imam looked at him. 'An Imam' he said gently 'is the father of all needy children who do not have a guardian. A father does this for his children. I wanted to satisfy and please the children'.

Source: Biharul Anwar, Vol. 41, page 123

The Date Seller

The girl sat on the street and sobbed loudly. Tears streamed down her cheeks and her body shook as she wept. In the busy market where she was, people glanced at her but continued walking. No-one seemed to have the time to stop and ask about her. Her sobs grew louder.

Imam Ali was passing by and heard the sounds of weeping. He turned towards the direction of the sound and found the girl on the street beside a shop selling dates. He sat down on the ground. 'What's the matter?' he asked kindly. 'Tell me why you are weeping.'

The girl stopped crying. She looked up at the kind man who cared enough to ask. Her face wet with her tears, she began her story. 'I work for a family who lives on this street. I bought dates from this shop and took them back home. But the dates were not very good and I had to bring them back to return to the date seller' she said. 'The date seller refuses to take back the dates. Now I am afraid to go home. I can't take the dates back and I don't have the money to give back to my master.'

Imam went inside the shop. It was a small but clean shop. The date seller came out. Imam asked him to take the dates back and return the money to the girl. The man became angry. 'I will not take back the dates' he said loudly. His face became red. He had no patience for the girl and her story.

Imam said nothing. He left the shop and tried to comfort the little girl as she sobbed even louder.

A neighboring shop owner saw what was happening and came over. 'Do you know who you were talking to?' he asked the date seller. 'That was Imam Ali (a). How can you talk to him like that?'

The date seller was stunned. He had not recognized the Imam (a) and felt very ashamed of himself. What would Imam think of him?

He came up to where Imam was. 'I am very sorry for what I said, please forgive me' he pleaded. 'I will return the money to the girl.'

The Imam looked on as the date seller returned the money to the girl and took the dates back.. 'You have to promise me to look after those who come to your shop' he said. 'Do not be so greedy and uncaring'.

Source: Biharul Anwar Vol 40 pg 332

Respect for Guests

The boy was excited. He put on good clothes and was ready before his father was. They had been invited by Imam Ali (a) for lunch. He was so excited. He wanted to see how Imam lived, how he ate, and so much more. As soon as the father was ready they set off. The boy wanted to run all the way to Imam's home.

Guests are highly respected. During those days when a guest was present for a meal, the host would wash their hands after the meal in a large bowl of water called a wash basin. This was to show their respect and appreciation for the guest. The boy thought to himself about it as he walked. Who would wash his hands, he wondered. Would the son of Imam Ali do it? Maybe a servant in their house would wash their hands.

When they reached the house, Imam was waiting for them. He smiled when he saw them and greeted them warmly. He welcomed them in and asked them to sit. The boy looked around, his eyes taking in everything in the first glance. Imam's house was smaller than theirs. But it was neat and clean. Everything seemed to be in its place and there was nothing that was unnecessary. It was simple but pleasant. After chatting for a while, they sat down to eat. Imam and his son sat on one side of the lunch mat and the boy and his father sat on the other. The boy was so comfortable, eating with the Imam whom he respected so much. He felt at home. He tried to eat slowly and chew well the way he saw Imam doing. Maybe that was good for him.

When they finished eating Imam and his son put away the food and plates. Imam requested for a wash basin and a jug. The boy looked around to see if a servant would come to wash their hands. The wash basin was brought and Imam picked it up along with the jug. He walked over to where the father was sitting. 'Allow me to pour water so you can wash your hands' he said. The man was startled. 'No, of course not' he said 'how is it possible that I let my Imam wash my hands. I can't let you do it.'

Imam smiled. He looked at him gently. 'Why not', he said 'am I not your brother? Why would it be wrong for a brother to wash his brother's hands? Let me do it and get the pleasure of Allah.' The man refused again but Imam insisted. When he finally agreed Imam poured water slowly over his hands and the man washed his hands in the basin.

The boy was watching wide-eyed. What would he do if Imam asked to wash his hands too? He would be so embarrassed. The boy was so worried he wanted to hide. But he saw that Imam finished washing his father's hands and then gave the basin to his son Muhammad. 'My son, please wash the hands of this boy' said the Imam. Then Imam explained. 'If it was only the boy who had come to our house for lunch I myself would have washed his hands. But when the father and son are together Allah likes that the father is respected more than the son.'

Muhammad washed the hands of the boy. He was almost the same age as the boy. The boy was relieved. His stomach did not feel so tight anymore. At least Imam himself had not washed his hands. He had shown respect to him by asking his son to do so and saved him from embarrassment.

Source: Bihar al Anwar, Vol. 9, page 598

Don't wait to be asked

Imam Ali (a) was walking in the market. The place was filled with people buying and selling food. The sounds of the people filled the air. Imam looked around. He saw a date seller who was selling large, ripe dates. The dates looked delicious.

Imam walked up to him. 'I want to buy two kilos of dates' he said. 'Please put them in a bag for me'. The man was pleased. That was a big sale. He jumped up and took a clean paper bag to put the dates in. He chose the finest dates for the Imam and closed the bag tightly. No date should fall out as Imam walked home. He handed it over to the Imam and Imam gave him his money.

Imam looked around. The dates were not for himself. He knew a certain man who was too poor to buy the dates. His family would be so happy to eat them. But the man never asked anyone. He had his self-respect and would not lower himself by asking from others. He tried to do what he could to provide food for his family. But he could not afford to buy such delicious dates.

A few companions of the Imam were also in the market. They were chatting as they walked through the market, enjoying the warm sun and the smells and sounds of the market. Imam called one of them aside and asked him to deliver the dates to the house of the poor man. There was no need to tell him who they were from. Just that it is a gift for the family.

A man from the group heard the conversation between Imam and his companion. He came up to the Imam. 'Why do you send him so many dates?' he asked the Imam. 'He himself has not asked for them.'

The Imam looked at him. His voice was gentle but firm. 'Why should I wait until he asks me?' said the Imam. 'If I give him dates after he has asked me for them I have not really given him anything. I would only be returning to him what he lost of self-respect by asking me. He would have lowered his face in front of me, the same face that he lowers on the ground when he prays and worships his God and my God. It is better to give without being asked.'

Source: Wasailush Shia Vol. 2

Why does he beg?

The old man walked with small, feeble steps. His stick struck the ground in front of him as he made sure nothing was on his way. His stick was now his eyes. His eyes were open but he could only see darkness all around. The sounds of birds and children told him it was daytime. He could hear people on camels, people walking to the market. The sun felt warm. But the old man's world was always dark.

He reached the gate of the market. This was his place. Each morning he would stand here, his cloak around him for comfort. His back was bent and he seemed to be looking at the ground. He stretched out his hands. People passing by would drop a few coins in them. The man put them in a basket. Then he would wait for more.

That morning Imam Ali (a) came out of the market. His eyes fell on this old man, begging for money. His heart sank. Why was such an old man begging? Was there no-one to look after him? Did he not have any family, any children who could take care of him?

Imam turned to his companions. His eyes were sad. 'Does anyone know this man?' he asked. 'Why does he beg?' The companions looked at the man. They had seen him before. 'Yes' said one of them. 'I know him, O Imam. He is a Christian man who worked hard when he was young. He supported himself and others with his work. But now he has become old and blind. He cannot work anymore. He has no-one to look after him and so he begs every day to be able to buy food for himself.'

The Imam felt angry. Angry and sad. Angry for the old man and his right to have someone take care of his needs when he could not. Sad that someone so old was left alone with no-one to care for him. 'So when he was young, people used him' said the Imam. 'They benefitted from his energy and work. Now that he is old, we let him beg?' Imam's eyes shone brightly. 'I will not let that happen.'

There was money in the public treasury that could be used for the needy. Imam ordered that money should be taken from it to support the old man. The old man deserved that he should be looked after. 'Don't let him beg again' said the Imam. 'Give him what he needs. It is his right.'

Source: Wasailush Shia Vol. 2

Do not walk behind my camel

It was a warm, bright day. The sun was shining and the chirping of birds could be heard. A gentle breeze blew over the hot desert sand bringing some cool relief from the heat that was so normal in the desert. Men and women worked on their chores and children played together, running after each other.

Imam Ali (a) came out from his simple home. He walked over to his camel and rubbed its head. The camel grunted and its eyes shone. Imam was always gentle with animals. He gave it some water to drink. After it had its fill, Imam jumped on to the saddle and nudged the camel forward. 'Let's go' he said. 'We have to move fast.'

The men working nearby saw the Imam. They looked at the Imam as he passed by. They loved and respected him. One of them decided he wanted to be with the Imam so he started following the camel. Imam was riding slowly and the man was able to run and catch up with him. He walked fast behind the camel as Imam rode. Soon some more men joined him. The group started getting bigger. Soon there was a crowd of people walking behind the Imam.

Imam heard footsteps. He heard voices chatting and laughing and the sounds seemed to be coming behind him. But it kept on following him. Surprised, he turned around. 'What are these people doing' he thought to himself. 'Why are they following me?' He stopped the camel and turned around. The men caught up with him. 'Do you need something from me?' he asked gently. 'Why are you walking and running behind me?'

The men shook their heads. One of them came forward. 'No, O Imam' he said. 'We don't need anything. We just wanted to be with you. Out of respect and love for you we decided to follow you as you rode. We like to be with you'.

The Imam frowned. His eyes darkened. He was not pleased with this display of humbleness by the people. 'Do you not know that it is wrong to walk behind someone who is riding' he explained to the people. 'It is belittling for the people who do it. And it can create pride in the rider. It is wrong both for the rider and for those behind him. Please go back.'

The men understood. Imam never liked a display of too much respect. That was meant for God only. In their hearts they respected the Imam even more. He did not demand respect as many leaders did. He just earned it without asking for it. They bid him goodbye and turned back slowly. Back to the work they had been doing.

Imam saw them leave. Then he turned around again. 'Let's go' he told his camel. 'Thank you for waiting patiently. We can now move along.'

Source: Tuhaf ul Uqool, page 209

I too can wait

One afternoon Imam Ali (a) walked by a man selling meat. The man had a small place which was clean and neat. His meat was laid out on the table and it looked fresh and healthy. People stopped to look at it. Many bought some to take home. It would make a delicious dinner.

Imam watched the people. He often walked around the streets to be with people and find out their needs. He would go to the market to see how the shop keepers treated people. When he saw wrong happening he would point it out and advise them to make things right. His gentle but firm manner made people listen to him.

The shopkeeper saw Imam. He called him over. 'Look at my meat' he said. 'It's fresh from the animals on the farm. It will be very soft and tasty when cooked'. The Imam agreed with him. 'Yes' he said. 'You sell good quality meat. Keep up the good work'.

'Why don't you buy some to take home for the family' asked the man. 'They will be happy to have meat for a good meal. I can cut you the best steaks from these pieces on my table'.

Imam shook his head. He moved away. 'No, he said. 'I don't want any meat'.

The man continued trying to get the Imam to buy some meat. He wanted the Imam to take some home. 'Please buy some meat' he said 'you will be happy that you did'.

'I don't have any money with me' said the Imam. 'Another time, I will come back'.

'That's no problem at all' said the man. 'I know you so well. I can wait to get my money. I trust you completely and know that you will come back to pay me. Just take the meat for now and pay later'.

The Imam patted the man on his back. He appreciated the man's kind words. But he was firm. 'No' he said. 'I too can wait. I will come back when I have money to buy the meat.'

Source: Irshadul Quloob, Dilmy, page 119

Two New Shirts

Imam Ali (a) and his servant Qambar went to the market. 'We need to buy two shirts' said the Imam. 'One for you and another one for myself.' They looked around. There were many shops selling clothes. Each seller tried to attract people to his shop. 'Come, I have good quality shirts' shouted one seller. Another was excitedly waving some clothes in the air for people to see. Yet another had put on a display of all the new clothes he had. People seemed busy shopping for what they needed.

Imam stopped at one of the shops. The shirts seemed good and he picked up one. The shopkeeper saw and recognised him right away. 'O Imam' he said. 'Please take whichever one you want. I don't want any money for it.'

Imam looked away. He did not like to take anything for free. He knew the man could not afford it. He smiled at him and moved on. They went to another shop and found two shirts which Imam and Qambar both liked. They asked the young man in the shop how much the shirts would cost. One was for three dirhams and the other simpler one was priced at two dirhams. Imam gave him the money and he put the two shirts in a bag for them.

The Imam and Qambar walked back home. Their shopping was done. When they went inside Imam took out the shirt that was for three dirhams and gave it to Qambar. 'This is yours' he said, smiling at the young man who was like a son to him. 'No, no' said Qambar. He was embarrassed and looked down. 'No my Imam, that shirt would be better on you. You go to the minbar and people see you. I am a servant and work at home. I can take the simpler shirt.'

'Of course not' said the Imam. He pushed the shirt towards Qambar. 'Take it Qambar' he said. 'You are young and I am old. And a good quality shirt looks better on a young man. I will be pleased if you take it and I will wear the other one.'

Source: Biharul Anwar, vol.9