



Friday 30<sup>th</sup> September 2016

## The Commemoration of Ashura

Dear Sir / Madam,

I am writing to you to inform you of an upcoming religious commemoration for Shia Muslims, Ashura, which is due to take place on Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> October 2016 and is likely to result in students in your school being unable to attend on that day. Please note, the date may vary according to the sighting of the moon as the Islamic calendar is lunar based.

By way of introduction, my name is Sajjad Govani and I am the principal of the Shia Ithna'asheri Madressa which is a community Sunday school which has just under 1,000 students (aged 4 – 16) and is based in Stanmore, in the London borough of Harrow. Our students primarily reside in the London boroughs of Harrow, Brent, and Hillingdon however some do live further afield.

You may already be aware that for Shia Muslims, the month of Muharram (first month of the Islamic year) brings with it the commemoration and mourning of the martyrdom of Husain, the grandson of the Holy Prophet Muhammed (peace and blessings on him and his Holy Progeny). I would like to take this opportunity to inform you about the importance of this event and the reasons why some of the pupils in your school during the period 3<sup>rd</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> October will be attending their local mosque on a daily basis each evening, culminating in the commemoration of Ashura during the day on Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> October.

### Who is Husain?

Husain was the grandson of the Holy Prophet Muhammed and the son of Ali, the first Shia Imam [successor to the Prophet] and the fourth ruler [Caliph] of the Muslims.

Husain was revered as a knowledgeable, pious and generous man, who took seriously his responsibility in looking after the poor and needy people in his town. Because of both his lineage and stature, he was and still is regarded as a beacon of guidance for one and all, and is the perfect role model for all those who wish to walk the path of righteousness.

### What happened on Ashura?

In the month of Muharram, 61 AH [after Hijrah – Islamic year] (approx. 20 October 680 AD), a conflict took place in Iraq at a place called Kerbala, south of Bagdad. A large army (in its tens of thousands) had been mobilised by the then Caliph of the Umayyad regime to besiege a small group of people led by Husain, whose group numbered around a hundred and included women and children. The aim of the Caliph was to pressure Husain into paying allegiance to him, and his name was Yazid.

Husain had refused to submit to the authority of the Caliph who was unjust, oppressive and openly defiant of all the Islamic and humanitarian values and norms which he was expected to uphold as the Caliph. A battle subsequently took place after much negotiation, in which Husain and all his loyal companions were mercilessly butchered. Subsequently, the women and children of the friends and family of Husain were taken as captive on a long and arduous journey from Kerbala in Iraq to Damascus in Syria where they were imprisoned and paraded – a sign of humiliation of the household of the Prophet (may peace be on him and his progeny)

### Why do we still remember the day of Ashura?

The actions of Husain represented a conscious choice to courageously resist and sacrifice his life for a higher cause. The rest of the entire Muslim nation at the time had failed to challenge the malpractice of the then Caliph, and had acquiesced to his authority and given their obedience even though he was an oppressive and cruel tyrant.

In such circumstances, passiveness by Husain would have signalled not only the end of the religion of Islam (only some 75 years since its inception), but also the end of all humanitarian values of liberty, freedom, integrity, honesty etc. instilled and promoted by Islam. Thus Husain took the heavy responsibility of challenging the despot and stand firm for the sake of all values promoted and espoused by the religion of Islam. In his own words, he said:

***"I have not risen to spread evil or to show off, nor to spread immorality or oppression. But I have done so for the betterment of Muslims, and to propagate goodness and forbid evil."***

Despite this event occurring over 1400 years ago, it was the message that Hussain stood for which resonates today. This was one of peace, tolerance and justice towards all of humanity, and these values are what we hope to reinvigorate in commemorating this tragedy today. Politicians and historians alike have spoken of the event - Gandhi referred to Hussain as a "great saint" and praised his peaceful nature, and English historian Edward Gibbons reported that "in a distant age and climate the tragic scene of the death of Hussain will awaken the sympathy of the coldest reader."

Muslim communities around the world congregate in their respective centres each night throughout this month, in particular during the first 10 nights where these events are narrated and their moral lessons discussed. The commemoration culminates on the 10th day of the month, the day of Ashura, when the actual battle took place. It is considered a sacred day of victory of good over evil and as followers of this great personality, we are urged to spend this day in prayers and in eulogising the tragedy that befell Husain. For more information on the personality of Husain and the values he died for, please visit [www.whoishussain.org](http://www.whoishussain.org).

As mentioned, over the period 3<sup>rd</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> October pupils from your school may be attending their local mosque each evening and may also be absent on Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> October to attend the Ashura commemoration at their local mosque. We wish to extend our appreciation in advance for your cooperation and understanding in this matter and should you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours faithfully,



**Sajjad Govani**

Principal

Shia Ithna'asheri Madressa Stanmore, London, United Kingdom