

IBRAHIM عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ: THE FATHER OF SUPREME DEVOTION

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Question: *I have a difficult time understanding some of the stories narrated about Sayyiduna Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace), such as how he left his baby in the desert, or how he later attempted to sacrifice his son. I have seen the devastating effects of fathers not being around for their children, so perhaps this is why I am having a hard time. Can you help me understand?*

Answer: A Bedouin once came to the Prophet Muhammad (Allah bless him and grant him peace) and remarked with surprise when he found that the Prophet kissed children. “You kiss children? We do not kiss them.” To this the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) reprovingly replied: “I cannot put mercy into your heart if Allah has removed it from you.”ⁱ

Affection and physically expressed love for children is part of the innate practice of the Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and grant him peace). If one does not express one’s love for one’s children openly and directly, it is a sign that one’s heart is devoid of mercy, which is a lamentable condition to be in since we ourselves are shown mercy by God when we show mercy to His creation.ⁱⁱ



Modern Questions, Grounded Answers

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The Father's Duty in Islam

In order to understand the lessons we are to learn as Muslims from the most famous stories regarding the Prophet Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace) as father, we must first be clear about one thing: In Islam, fathers are required and expected to play an active role in the lives of their children. We know this through the teaching and lived practice of our Prophet Muhammad (Allah bless him and grant him peace). As the one sent as the Mercy to All the Worlds,ⁱⁱⁱ he showed the utmost love and mercy toward children, especially to his own children. About his youngest daughter Fatima (Allah be pleased with her) he taught us: *"Fatima is a part of my very flesh. Whoever angers her, angers me."*^{iv} On one occasion, the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) was served a generous meal that included meat. Thinking of her first despite his own hunger, he picked up a portion of the meat and had it sent to Fatima, saying she had not eaten in three days.

The Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) not only showed love but also did *tarbiya*, i.e. provided moral instruction, and this loving concern for her spiritual and religious guidance was not limited to her youth but continued into her adulthood. At a certain period, she and her noble husband 'Ali (Allah be pleased with them both) were working hard to manage their household duties, to the point that their work was feeling like too much. Sayyiduna 'Ali's (Allah be pleased with him) chest was exhausted from drawing water, and Sayyida Fatima (Allah be pleased with her) had blistered hands from grinding grain. During this time, some captives were brought to the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace), so 'Ali

asked Fatima to ask her father if they could be given one of the captives as domestic help. She went to him, but became too embarrassed to make the request, and returned home without asking. Then the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) came by to visit, and by this time the two of them had already retired on their floor bedding for sleep. He bade them not to get up, and instead went and sat right between them, in a loving and intimate manner such that Sayyiduna 'Ali (Allah be pleased with him) said he could feel the *"coolness of his feet upon my chest."* The Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) asked what their concerns were, and upon learning of their struggles, he taught Fatima that better than to have a slave was to regularly recite a certain litany in order to have *baraka* and ease in her work and time.^v

From the Prophet's teachings and personal example, the scholars of Islam derived numerous rulings regarding the rights of the child over his father. The Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and grant him peace) confirmed the existence of such rights when explaining the word *"abrār (righteous)"* as used in the Qur'an: "Allah has called them *abrār* because they honored (*barrū*) their fathers and children. Just as your father has rights over you, so too your child has rights over you."^{vi} The 'ulama list numerous such rights, among them: that a man make sure to not have children except by marrying a righteous woman who will be a good mother to his children; that he give his children a good name and carry out the various rituals pertaining to children (e.g. *tahnik*, animal sacrifice, circumcision); to spend on the child's food and care; and to provide him with moral instruction. Spending and providing for the child's needs is so obvious a duty that the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him

peace) once commented simply thus: “It is sufficient sin for a man if he neglects those on whom he is obliged to spend.”^{vii}

But it is not only physical support and maintenance of the child that is required. The father’s active presence in the life of the child is also critical, because the father is religiously obligated to raise him well, as can be attested to by the words of Imam al-Nawawi:

The father should bring them up with good manners in all things—eating, drinking, dressing, sleeping, going out of the house, entering the house, riding on mounts, etc.—and in all their affairs. He should keep them away from evil characteristics such as cowardice, stinginess, lack of chivalry, lack of ambition, etc.^{viii}

From the above discussion, it is clear that a child has strong rights over his father that he be loved, protected, provided for, and raised well. This is obvious to any Muslim, and in fact is a truth of human society that has never been denied by any civilized person. What then are we as Muslims to make of the stories about Sayyiduna Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace) that are mentioned in the Qur’an and Hadith?

Benefiting from Ibrahim عَلَيْهِ السَّلَام as Modern Muslims

The stories in question are as follows:

I: *Ibrahim brought [Hajar] and her son Isma’il while she was suckling him, to a place near the Ka’ba under a tree on the spot of Zamzam, at the highest place in the mosque. During those days there was no one in Mecca, nor was there*

any water. So he made them sit over there and placed near them a leather bag containing some dates, and a small water-skin containing some water, and set out homeward. The mother of Isma’il followed him saying, “O Ibrahim! Where are you going, leaving us in this valley where there is no person and nothing at all?” She repeated that to him many times, but he did not look back at her. Then she asked him, “Has Allah ordered you to do so?” He said, “Yes.” She said, “Then He will not neglect us,” and returned while Ibrahim proceeded onwards. (Hadith narrated from ibn ‘Abbas in Bukhari)

II: Years later, Sayyiduna Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace) was commanded via a dream to sacrifice his son.^{ix} As stated in the Qur’an: *And when he reached the age wherein he could work [with his father], [Ibrahim] said: “O my son, I have seen a dream that I must sacrifice you, so see what you think.” He said, “O my father, do as you have been commanded. You will find me, insha Allah, of those who are steadfast.” And when they both had submitted and he had laid him down prostrate on his forehead (for sacrifice), We called out to him “O Ibrahim! You have fulfilled your vision, thus indeed do We reward those who do right: For indeed this was a clear trial.” And we ransomed him with a tremendous sacrifice [of the ram] and left for him [to be praised] among succeeding generations. Peace be upon Ibrahim! Thus do we reward those who do right. (al-Saffat 37:102-110)*

The first story tells how Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace) left his wife Hajar and their son Isma’il in the desert, while the second tells of how Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace) acted fully on the command to kill his son (before God miraculously replaced the boy with an animal to

be sacrificed). There is no doubt of course that killing one's child is a forbidden act in Islam, which explains away any possibility of acting on the second story. As for the first story, we have already seen from the above discussion of the Muhammadan example that a father's active presence in the life of his child is critically important. Still, in order to avert any claims toward ambiguity arising from the story of Sayyiduna Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace), the scholars of Islam make the ruling of the father's duty to his child explicit:

It is not permitted for anyone to refer [as proof] to this [incident] when abandoning his child and family in a wasteland as an act of reliance on the Mighty, the Merciful and out of following the action of Ibrahim al-Khalil, as the extremist Sufis say regarding the reality of the state of reliance (*tawakkul*). For verily Ibrahim did that at the command of Allah, as can be seen in his statement in the *hadith* [when asked] "Has Allah ordered you to do so?" and he said, "Yes."^x

In other words, the Shariah is clear that this action of Sayyiduna Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace) can in no way serve as a proof for its permissibility for Muslims who came after him. We are not to follow Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace) in the outward details of what he did. Given the obviousness of the rights in Islam of a child over his father, and the prohibition of following the Prophet Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace) in the outward actions of these stories, one must then acknowledge one thing: *The Qur'anic stories of Sayyiduna Ibrahim (Allah*

grant him peace) leaving his baby in the desert or sacrificing his son are supposed to be shocking.

They are supposed to be shocking in order to call our attention to the fact that there is more to Islam than simply outward actions. The word *islam* means submission, and these stories exemplify submission to Allah in a way that goes well beyond prayer, fasting, and doing good deeds. Sayyiduna Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace), whom Allah granted the title *Khalil Allah*, or the Intimate Friend of God, demonstrated his submission at such a level that he was willing to sacrifice a most basic instinct (protecting his child!) for the sake of Allah. He submitted because it was the right of Allah as King and Creator of the universe that he submit. Being the Intimate Friend of Allah, Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace) knew that God would not wrong him in any way, but that was not what he expressed his hope in. He simply *did*.

The point is, Allah Most High tells us about His commands to Sayyiduna Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace) regarding his role as father in order to teach us *spiritual* and not *legal* lessons. Traditionally, Muslims have known this at an intrinsic level: we know that the Prophet Muhammad (Allah bless him and grant him peace) has taught fathers how to be, so when hearing the accounts from the life of Sayyiduna Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace) we know there is some other, deeper, aspect of the deen that is being conveyed to us. As modern people, however, this insight—that there is something else spiritual going on in the story—is sometimes lost on us. We have difficulty understanding the lessons inherent within these stories about Sayyiduna Ibrahim, and there are multiple reasons for why that is.

One of the most basic reasons why we have a hard time understanding the powerful lessons in these stories is the fact that our changed social realities impinge on our understanding of the spiritual teachings of Islam. In terms of relationships, what was unthinkable in the past—across time, space and religions—is not only thinkable but actually occurring now in our societies due to the breakdown of the social fabric. There are rulings in the classical law of Islam that are predicated on the assumption that a father would never leave his child.^{xi} But in our day, not only is the “deadbeat dad” a reality in many societies, even the more unthinkable fact of a mother leaving her children to pursue art or work is a phenomenon now not unheard of, particularly in Western societies.

Another thing that blocks us from benefiting from the stories is the influence of modern intellectual ideas on our *‘aqida*, i.e. what we think and believe to be true. The great equalizing push of secular liberalism means that we no longer see the prophets as being on the very top of a grand hierarchy, set up by God as a way to teach us how to be. We see them to be men, “just like us,” due to the liberal idea of the fundamental equality of all men and also because of modern movements in Islam that deemphasize concepts like *adab* (decorum) and the veneration of godly people. The more we see ourselves approaching their status, such that the gap between us and the divinely inspired prophets decreases in our eyes, the less we feel compelled to push ourselves to understand what Allah is getting at by telling their example. When not compelled to move beyond our own realities to higher spiritual ones, we can then only interpret the actions of the prophets through our own inclinations and social understandings.

With the equalizing push of secular liberalism comes a growing emphasis on the right of the human toward self- (and not divine) determination. We feel entitled to our own opinions and our own perceptions in a manner unlike any era of the human past. What this ultimately means is that the human, “rational,” way of understanding what is right and wrong takes precedence over any understanding that comes from God. And in this way, we are left completely unable to comprehend a subtle but critically important theological point: Allah is the One who determines what is Right and what is Wrong, whether you understand the reasoning behind His determinations or not.

This point of *‘aqida* is deeply connected to the idea of submission and slavehood to Allah. To restate it: according to the *‘aqida* of *Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama‘ah* (the formal name of those who consider themselves to be “Sunni” Muslims), the meaning, or ultimate consequence, of any given action can only be determined by Allah Himself, the Lord and Master of all creation.^{xii} Out of His Generosity to us, He has made it so that we can see the wisdom in many of His rulings. For example, it is not difficult for a human being to understand why murder is unlawful, why charity brings reward, and why slander is a sin. But sometimes religious rulings are not based on any rational sense (e.g. why must we pray five times a day, instead of four, or six?). And sometimes on rare occasions, when dealing directly with his prophets and not as commands to the generality of believers, Allah might even reverse the ruling so that it seems to go against reason in order to bring higher truths to light.

Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace)’s life events are the most stark example of this. When he was

young, his own father had wanted to kill him by stoning him to death, as attested to in the Qur'an.^{xiii} But while the action of his father wanting to kill him was an act of unbelief that leads to Hell, the action of Sayyiduna Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace) in going to kill his son at the moment of sacrifice was determined by Allah to be a good deed. In fact, it was a deed deemed so excellent as to become an example for believers for all time to come, since it shows Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace)'s supreme, unparalleled belief in the Supremacy and Lordship of Allah in a manner commensurate with his high rank not just among believers but among all of the prophets of God.

A final reason why we may have a hard time understanding the actions of Sayyiduna Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace) regarding his son is that many modern Muslims have forgotten the centrality of the spiritual teachings of Islam. In line with our materialist, physically oriented era, we see Islam to be a set of rules, and can only interpret the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah through the lens of *fiqh*, or legal prescriptions. This is a momentous loss of religious faculty. If we cannot see that spirituality—the subtle perception of God's Hand in all things—is what gives meaning and life to the teachings of Islam, we will never fully be able to understand what beautiful thing was happening as Sayyiduna Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace) was turning his back on his wife and child in the desert. He was, in that turning, shedding any last traces of love and devotion to anything other than Allah.^{xiv} And once that occurred, the devotion he had to his family had become a devotion that was solely and purely for the sake of Allah.

In developing a higher level of spiritual purity, there was no denial of his humanness. The first

thing Sayyiduna Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace) did when he was out of sight of his family was to pray and beseech Allah for their well-being: “*Our Lord, I have settled some of my descendants in an uncultivated valley near Your sacred House, our Lord, that they may establish prayer. So make hearts among the people incline toward them and provide for them from the fruits that they might be grateful.*”^{xv} His prayer was answered, and his unusual-seeming action became the reason for the development of Mecca, the coming of our Prophet Muhammad (Allah bless him and grant him peace), and the establishment of the annual pilgrimage. “*Actions are by their intentions,*”^{xvi} and clearly in this case the tremendous level of sincerity, devotion, and submission shown by Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace) led to tremendous good that extended well beyond himself and his offspring to reach and benefit believers to the present day. The internal and external of every action is connected. We must not forget this; we must give each aspect its due to gain success and religious balance.

Regarding these particular accounts of Sayyiduna Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace), we learn something great as far as the internal aspect of how we should *be*. The starkness of the action and the unapologeticness of Sayyiduna Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace) afterwards are signs to us of what our internal state should be with our Lord. As modern people, we have a desire to understand with our minds everything, but this sometimes clashes with the soul's ability to submit to the divine call. As submitted Muslims, we might not understand the rationale behind every divine command, but we must do them anyway. Some believers manage to still act on the commands they don't understand because they trust in His

Wisdom and in the fact that He has promised that a believer's good deeds will never go to waste (such deeds always result in even more good, both in this world and in the Next). Others, at an even higher level of *iman*, act simply because they understand the supreme rank of Allah as Lord, and so their attitude is: "We hear and we obey"^{xvii} without hesitation and without needing an explanation. They are the perfectly submitted slaves of Allah, who see nothing before them except Him.

In the words of one Sufi commentator of the Qur'an, the more one rises in one's witnessing of Allah, the greater the trials he must face: "*the higher the rank of the person, the greater the trial.*"^{xviii} Given Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace)'s elevated rank and tremendous witnessing of the Divine Presence, the trials he faced were greater, and the reward he received from His Lord even more so. Our ability to understand the wondrous spiritual lessons in the

events of Ibrahim (Allah grant him peace)'s life hang on our ability to understand this truth. However, such understanding does not come automatically without effort. It requires that we seek knowledge and learn at least the basics required of every individual Muslim regarding matters of belief (*'aqida*) and practice (*fiqh*). When we have the knowledge, we must also put it into practice in our worship and in our relationships. The more we practice it, and demonstrate our *taqwa* or Godfearingness, the more we are able to experience the spiritual truths of Islam at a deeper level, since Allah Most High has promised us: "*Have taqwa of Allah and He will grant you a Discernment (between Right and Wrong).*"^{xix} By absorbing the beliefs of Islam and by conducting our lives according to its teachings, the whole matter becomes clear: No doubt the Muslim father must be supremely devoted, but first and foremost his devotion is to Allah.

ⁱ Bukhari and Muslim

ⁱⁱ Abdullah ibn 'Amr reported: The Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and grant him peace) said, "**The merciful will be shown mercy by the Most Merciful. Be merciful to those on the earth and the One in the heavens will have mercy upon you.**" (Tirmidhi)

ⁱⁱⁱ Qur'an, *Surah al-Anbiya*, 21:107.

^{iv} Bukhari

^v Musnad Imam Ahmad

^{vi} This hadith is listed in the *tafsir* of ibn Kathir as commentary for the verse in Surat Al 'Imran 3:198, ibn Kathir, Isma'il, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Adhim*, Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, 2010, vol. 2, p. 173.

^{vii} Abu Dawud

^{viii} *Sharh al-Nawawi 'ala Sahih Muslim*; quotation adapted from translation at:

<https://islamqa.info/en/answers/20064/rights-of-children> [Last accessed: September 3, 2020.]

^{ix} There is a difference of opinion on whether the sacrificial son was Isma'il (Allah grant him peace) or Ishaq (Allah grant him peace), with ibn Kathir holding to the position that it was Isma'il and al-Tabari holding to the position that it was Ishaq. Numerous prominent Sahaba,

including Sayyiduna Umar and Sayyiduna 'Ali (Allah be pleased with them), held that it was Ishaq (Allah grant him peace), to the point that al-Qurtubi stated "this is the position most strongly narrated from both the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) and his Companions." However, this was not his own position nor the commonly held position among Muslims today, who generally hold the sacrificial son to be Isma'il. See: al-Qurtubi, Muhammad b. Ahmad, *al-Jami' li ahkam al-Qur'an*. Cairo: Dar al-Shu'b, n.d. vol. 8, p. 5543-45 and Shafi, Muhammad, *Ma'arif al-Qur'an: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Holy Qur'an*, Karachi: Maktaba Dar al-'Uloom, 2003, vol. 7, p. 466-72.

^x al-Qurtubi, Muhammad b. Ahmad, *al-Jami' li ahkam al-Qur'an*. Cairo: Dar al-Shu'b, n.d. vol. 5, p. 3599.

^{xi} Such as those relating to claiming the lineage of his wife's offspring when there is doubt as to who the father might be.

^{xii} This is a basic tenet of Sunni *aqida*, that actions are not intrinsically good or evil. They only acquire their moral value according to what Allah assigns to them.

^{xiii} Qur'an, *Surah Maryam*, 19:46.

^{xiv} For further discussion on this point, see the statements of the *ahl al-ishara* included by Imam al-Qurtubi in his *tafsir*. al-Qurtubi, Muhammad b. Ahmad, *al-Jami` li ahkam al-Qur'an*. Cairo: Dar al-Shu`b, n.d. vol. 8, p. 5549.

^{xv} Qur'an, *Surah Ibrahim*, 14:37.

^{xvi} Bukhari

^{xvii} Qur'an, *Surah al-Baqara*, 2:285.

^{xviii} Ibn 'Ajiba, Ahmad. *Al-Bahr al-Madid fi Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Majid*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2010, v. 6, p. 185.

^{xix} Qur'an, al-Anfal, 8:29. The Sufis describe this process toward spiritual becoming as *'ilm* (knowledge), *'amal* (practice), *hāl* (praiseworthy spiritual state).