Walking to Karbala to find eternal light and the origin of all love.

Saarah Bokhari and Ayaz Ali share their experiences and photographs of the Shia Muslim Arbaeen pilgrimage to the city of Karbala which, since 680CE, has drawn huge numbers of pilgrims to remember the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the third Shia Imam. As many as 20 million attend this pilgrimage in modern day Iraq. Here is the text of the extended version of their interview with REToday for the website. A shorter version appears in the magazine. (Images © Ayaz Ali)

The journey to the mosque at Karbala is completed to remember the 40th day after the martyrdom of the Shia Imam Hussain 1340 years ago (680CE). Pilgrims from many nations walk to Karbala in huge processions.

Saarah Bokhari writes:
For ten years I embarked yearly upon the pilgrimage of the six holy Imams buried in Iraq, including Imam Hussain - and mostly consecutively for the Arbaeen pilgrimage.

Imam Hussain is the third of twelve Imams who are the successors of Prophet Muhammad, each considered to be the infallible and luminous lights from the Household of Purity, and the manifestations of the perfect human. Imam Hussain has the unique title of the “Master of Paradise” - thus showing reverence for his legacy towards the path of divine love. This is known as embarking upon the “Ark of Salvation.” His remembrance is said to revive and soften the human heart, and guide one to the path of Oneness.

Every year Shia Muslims commemorate how despite his elevated status, Imam Hussain, his seventy-two family members, young children and close companions were brutally exiled from their Prophetic home, and murdered in the land of Karbala. We recall this in order to pay tribute to their story of divine love in the face of the epitome of tragedy. We recall our Imam’s perfected
character in the midst of hardships as our barometer and guide for spiritual ethics, principles, morality, and mannerisms.

Despite the height of trials Imam Hussain endured, we remain in awe of his acts of kindness intertwined with courage, his resilience intertwined with humility, his service to humanity and generous love for strangers, friends and foes, and the wisdom which lead his principled stances. We seek to serve God and humanity in the way he exemplified, and to act upon the message of soul freedom that He lived and died to preserve as our eternal inspiration. In his footsteps, we seek a life striving for our spiritual perfection, away from the life of vice embodied by his killers. Imam Hussain’s continuing inspiration lies in the fact we believe he is very much alive, not dead (Quran 2:154) - a king of hearts who still guides us, as we strive to live in his way.

On the pilgrimage, what might be some of the common emotions and recollections of the participants?

The pilgrimage is undertaken as though you are visiting a living, ruling King – indeed, the Master of Paradise. This awe is heightened through the unification of pilgrims, where our vast and various lifepaths align in his love. Though our intentionality lies in the humility of being a servant before our master, the nature of this relationship is always poetic – it’s much like a lover journeying towards their dearest Beloved. There is a sense of heightened self-awareness of your own thoughts and actions as you enter divine union, for our narrations state that the angels accompany the visitors to Imam Hussain and shower immense blessings upon them. We intend to switch off from our lives of materialism, in order to reap the spiritual benefits in the holy land and immerse ourselves in the purification of the soul.

It’s a journey which combines the tragedy of history alongside the elation of union with the origin of all love from the eternal purified light, and your feelings often fluctuate between these two sentiments. During the Arbaeen seasonal pilgrimage, pilgrims often walk for days towards the city of Karbala. Accompanying every footstep is an intense yearning. We express our desire to stand in front of our Imam having honoured his message, with the actions of one who is sincere towards him.

When you arrive, the energy that surrounds Imam Hussain’s grave is beautifully electric and immediately captivates you. It’s almost paradoxical, how you can simultaneously feel the greatest joy to be there, and sadness as tears flow for the tragedies of the land. Whilst there is constant physical movement of people within the shrine, there is a feeling of complete stillness within. It’s heavenly. At this point it’s surreal to fathom how he died 1400 years ago, for the thousands of flags held by pilgrims with the name of Hussain, makes it feel as though he is alive, reigning over the city. The constant stream of the outpouring of love signifies to pilgrims the eternal victory of the path of love beyond any fear. It’s a land of hope, where we believe God testifies to the fulfilment of our prayers, for the sake of His love of Imam Hussain and his pure sacrifices in His way.

Hence, Karbala is a city where the language spoken is one of love and tears, where the feeling of emotional vulnerability and authenticity is very distinct. Everyone has their own unique love story with Imam Hussain. Pilgrims greet each other with warmth, and strangers become familiar, often bonding in how far we each came to pay our salutations to Imam Hussain. Pilgrims believe they are directly hosted by Imam Hussain, and therefore every kindness you receive is but by the blessing of him. Many seek the answer to their innermost wishes here, for Imam Hussain is an intercessor before God and Karbala is said to be a land of miracles. This heightens the feeling that you are visiting Him - alive and now – and not a mere shrine.

You find yourself amidst pilgrims reciting aloud, singing hymns of praise, expressing heartfelt poetic expressions about Imam Hussain and his companions, speaking to him, calling out to
him, raising their hand towards him in reverence. There is a communal sense of joy for being amidst the lovers of the Imam for whom people from all over the world generously serve you throughout your journey with food, shelter, and cater to all your needs for free. There seems to be a perpetual cycle of acts of love in Imam Hussain’s name, for his sake.

The sense of community and unity the pilgrims experience as they walk is strengthened by the communal meals like this one, served generously in a tent after a day’s journey. The Muslim concept of worldwide brotherhood and sisterhood, the Ummah, is lived out in the experiences of the pilgrims.

What are the spiritual impacts of the journey to Karbala?

In all the many stories embedded within the land of Karbala, engraved within the markings of its history, there is a mirror of perspective upheld to you in light of your own spiritual journey. Visitation incurs reflection upon how as humans we each have our own tests and trials on our path to spiritual perfection, and our ambition is to embody the highest of morality despite the constraints of the circumstances of our time and individual lives. This is the same spiritual purpose manifested by Imam Hussain and his companions: to be free in their love of God irrespective of circumstance. The battle signifies the dichotomy of striving in the pure love of the Divine, as opposed to striving for the alluring yet fleeting, transient world.

Arbaeen specifically tells the story of a caravan of the holiest of women, the ladies from the family of the Prophet lead by Zainab, who were held captive and tortured by the Caliph Yazid on their journey from Karbala to Damascus, before they returned to the land of Karbala a final time to complete the rituals due to their fallen loved ones after their deaths. They declared victory, for they did not once surrender their principles nor values despite the loss of each of their loved ones. Their freedom was a spiritual freedom, free from a slavery towards the vices that chain one’s soul. Free from giving up hope, despite how trying their journey was. Free - because despite it all, they still believed in and fought to uphold the power of divine love
exemplified by Imam Hussain. During Arbaeen, we walk in their footsteps to revolutionise our own souls.

Due to the vast variety of the backgrounds of the companions of Imam Hussain, be it in ethnicity, social status, religion or gender, the stories of each of those 72 brave heroes resonate uniquely with the pilgrims, depending on who you are, and where you are in life. As you change and grow as a person, you relate to different elements of their unique stories due to the universality in their acts of loyalty, sacrifice, principle, and shared humanness. It inspires one to want to be your best, and we pray our love for him catalyses a desire for positive reform in all aspects of our lives. We recall how the spectrum and potential to be a tyrant or a saint exists within each and every human being, and how it is our duty to strive towards the path of goodness, in order to be conquerors in our own internal spiritual battles, to gain closeness to the pure path towards God, the Highest Good.

The photography is stunning. Can you tell me more about how the book was devised, imagined and made? (that might be one for Ayaz Ali as well)?

Ayaz Ali:

As a photographer, I have always held the belief that some experiences require presence of/in the moment. Photos capture that moment, however the real feeling of that moment is in the present.

In 2017, I went on to Iraq for Arbaeen visitation for the first time. The experience of walking from Najaf to Karbala with millions and millions of other zuwwar (visitors) was just beautiful. After the trip, there were many times I found myself struggling to describe the experience to people since much of the detail is something that requires that presence. So I thought about what would be a good way to share this experience highlighting the different aspects of this journey to the wider audience and this is how the idea of the book came about.

Following on, I spent some time researching to see what was out there in terms of a book on Arbaeen, especially one documenting the walk and the occasion of Arbaeen. I found that the coverage of this event in the mainstream media is very scarce. Moreover there is a negative perception when it comes to Iraq due to the different wars the country has gone through. It is essential to highlight the positive stories to change this impression and provide a spring board for further coverage of this event. With all this in mind, I embarked on this project to produce Arbaeen: A Lens into a Sacred Journey with Saarah Bokhari.

Saarah and I discussed what would be the best way to document this and present it for the wider audience. Our vision was that this book to be something that highlighted the spiritual aspect of this journey as a zaa’ir (visitor), walking from Najaf to Karbala; and encompassing the different emotions on this journey. It was a journey of intense work: defining and refining the narrative, the rigorous process of image selection from 3 years of archive material containing nearly 10,000 images, and a good dose of imposter syndrome along the way!
This gathering is simply huge – as many as 45 millions, people say (The Hajj to Makkah is about 3–4 million). But we hear very little of it in UK, including even in RE – why is that?

Iraq has endured socio-political turmoil for many years, the repercussions of which are still prevalent. The pilgrims journeying towards Karbala were also often targeted by terrorists upon the way. I am lucky to have travelled in a period of relative safety, with guided tours who ensured the security of global tourists. In this time, I witnessed how in recent years, journalists and academics had begun accompanying the walk to Karbala in the Arbaeen period as the road became safer. I loved witnessing the Arbaeen become universalised, as a spectrum of different flags from countries all across the world would present themselves. We then decided to compile this book from a faith believer’s lens when we recognised that coverage was scarce but a documentation had also not yet been produced; the Arbaeen was still very much unknown and its divine essence often lost in the plethora of socio-political instability. We produced the book in order to encourage more holistic coverage beyond just the physical rituals seen by the eye, as there is much spiritual sentiment and meaning within, and to cover this would require a collective effort on the part of those who had experienced it.

We hope the pilgrimage can continue in its strength of unity and peace post coronavirus, and it can be experienced and shared with people of all backgrounds and faiths, who are always warmly welcome to the city of Karbala!
The great mosque built in memory of Imam Hussain is the focal point for the pilgrims’ devotion and love. It is strikingly beautiful in these night time photos which mix passionate red and gold colour powerfully.
The Shi’a and Sunni branching of Islam is part of what about 200 000 GCSE RS students learn – but some today minimise the differences. What do you think are the most important differences especially as illustrated in Arbaeen? And what would you say about unity between Shi’a and Sunni? (e.g. is this division less important among British Muslims than in some other parts of the world?)

The most important difference between Sunnis and Shias lies in the belief of “wilayah” - Shias believe the Imams are the “divinely appointed guardians” appointed by the Prophet prior to his death, the last of whom is the awaited saviour – the Mahdi. Sunnis do not believe in this concept of wilayah, and rather believe in the politically nominated successorship of the “four Rightly Guided Caliphs” after the death of Prophet Muhammad. Due to this overarching difference, Sunni and Shia sources of authority differ in interpreting the Quran, and in narrating the life and traditions of the Prophet. It’s also important to note there are many differing interpretations of Sunnism and Shiism also.

More generally, there are many crossovers and similarities of faith between Sunnis and Shi’as, such as key pillars of faith, so it is important to view theological differences in the perspective of specific nuances in how to go about practicing, opposed to the beliefs being fundamentally apart. The Ahlulbayt - the family of the Prophet - particularly the “holy 5” - the Prophet, his daughter lady Fatima, her husband Imam Ali, and their two sons Imam Hasan and Hussain - are considered to hold a blessed position across all Muslims. I feel for teachers this is an important factor to highlight, for Sunnis too deeply revere Imam Hussain.

I have travelled hand in hand with Sunnis towards the graves of Ahlulbayt in Iraq and elsewhere. In Iraq too, Sunni-Shia harmony and intermarrying families was a norm for generations, yet the politicisation of the Sunni-Shia identity has exasperated differences, in addition to how extremism has sadly targeted the lives of innocents on all sides. Despite this, the most senior scholars in Iraq from both the Sunni and Shia encourage unity, and have often lead unified stances in the wars against terrorism.
I have immense love and respect for the many people in Iraq who I met, who in taking inspiration from Imam Hussain, never lost hope in wanting unity, peace, and strove to protect their loved ones and pilgrims from the violence and hatred of extremism and terrorism. The universality of Imam Hussain’s message inspires great inter and intrafaith harmony. Many great humanitarian leaders have been inspired by the raw humanness of Imam Hussain’s message. Today too, the Arbaeen for the love of Imam Hussain stands as an antithesis to hatred in the name of faith. It stands as a testimony to all the many people who witness this march of millions - irrespective of background, nationality, religion, sect, gender, creed - that peace and love can prevail even in the heart of turmoil, for love truly surpasses all, and hatred is the mere absence of love. This is our story of divine love, and the soul freedom we strive for.

Thanks so much for your generous collaboration in this work.

It's my absolute pleasure, thank you so much for the opportunity!

Teachers of RE will be interested to buy the book: Arbaeen: A Lens into a Sacred Journey Hardcover, 2019 by Saarah Bokhari (Author), Ayaz Ali (Photographer)