

Chapter Fourteen

ASH-SHURA'(SEEKING COUNSEL)

Definition of Shura

To seek the counsel and opinion of others and to learn from their experience and wisdom is an important Qur'anic character. It alerts us to issues that we may not be aware of and is useful before making important decisions.

We will discuss the following concepts:

- 1- To seek counsel is the Sunnah (tradition) of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)
- 2- Why is Shura' so important?
- 3- What qualities do we look for in the person whom we value his counsel and advice?
- 4- To give sound and sincere advice is a duty on Muslims
- 5- There is time for consultation, and there is a time for action

To seek counsel is the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

Allah ordered His messenger to seek the counsel of his companions in matters that were important and of mutual concern:

﴿ فَبِمَا رَحْمَةٍ مِّنَ اللَّهِ لِنْتَ لَهُمْ وَلَوْ كُنْتَ فَظًّا غَلِيظَ الْقَلْبِ لَانْفَضُّوا مِنْ حَوْلِكَ فَاعْفُ عَنْهُمْ وَاسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ وَشَاوِرْهُمْ فِي الْأَمْرِ فَإِذَا عَزَمْتَ فَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُتَوَكِّلِينَ ﴾ [آل عمران: ١٥٩]

It is part of the Mercy of Allah that thou dost deal gently with them. Werd thou severe or harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about thee: so pass over (their faults), and ask for (Allah's) forgiveness for them; and consult them in affairs (of moment). Then, when thou hast taken a decision, put thy trust in Allah. For Allah loves those who put their trust (in Him).

Al-Imran 3 : 159

Allah could have guided His messenger in a way that he did not need any counsel or input from his companions or any one else. But Allah in the Qur'an is teaching us to listen to others and respect their opinions, and not be arrogant. When several people discuss an issue it is more likely that they will express different points of view and present several options. Their collective opinion is subject to less error than the opinion of one person, even if that person possesses more knowledge and experience. No single person can encompass all aspects or think of different implications.

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) applied this principle of Shura' in his life, and sought the counsel of his companions whom he trusted on several occasions. Before facing Quraish in the battle of Badr he asked his companions to express their opinions. Abou Bakr and Omar expressed the views of the Muhajereens (immigrants). The Prophet (PBUH) kept quiet. Then Sa'd Bin Mo'adh from the Ansar (residents in Madina who supported their brothers) spoke and expressed the commitment of the Ansar and their willingness to follow the prophet's orders. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was well pleased with that support and proceeded to face his enemy in a battle that he did not expect, nor was he prepared for when the Muslims left Madina chasing the caravan of Quraish. When he sought the counsel of his companions he wanted to be sure of their commitment and loyalty. The Qur'an explains that some Muslims were not excited about fighting the Quraish, but were after the caravan and its riches:

﴿ كَمَا أَخْرَجَكَ رَبُّكَ مِنْ بَيْتِكَ بِالْحَقِّ وَإِنَّ فَرِيقًا مِّنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ لَكَاذِبُونَ ﴾

[الأنفال: ٥]

Just as thy Lord ordered thee out of thy house in truth, even though a party among the Believers disliked it,

Al-Anfal 8 : 5

﴿ تَجِدِلُونَكَ فِي الْحَقِّ بَعْدَ مَا تَبَيَّنَ كَأَنَّمَا يُسَاقُونَ إِلَى الْمَوْتِ وَهُمْ يَنْظُرُونَ ﴾ [الأنفال: ٥]

[الأنفال: ٥]

Disputing with thee concerning the truth after it was made manifest, as if they were being driven to death and they (actually) saw it.

Al-Anfal 8 : 6

﴿ وَإِذْ يَعِدُّكُمْ اللَّهُ إِحْدَى الطَّائِفَتَيْنِ أَنَّهَا لَكُمْ وَتَوَدُّونَ أَنَّ غَيْرَ ذَاتِ الشَّوْكَةِ تَكُونُ لَكُمْ وَيُرِيدُ اللَّهُ أَنْ يُحِقَّ الْحَقَّ بِكَلِمَاتِهِ وَيَقْطَعَ دَابِرَ الْكَافِرِينَ ﴾ [الأنفال: ٧]

[الأنفال: ٧]

Behold! Allah promised you one of the two (enemy) parties, that it should be yours: ye wished that the one unarmed should be yours, but Allah willed to justify the Truth according to His words, and to cut off the roots of the Unbelievers.

Al-Anfal 8 : 7

When Al-Bara'a Bin Azeb suggested encamping close to the water well before the battle, the Prophet accepted his counsel and followed his advice.

When there was no divine revelation regarding the captives of Badr, the Prophet (PBUH) asked Abou Bakr for advice. He said: (They are your people and belong to the same tribe, let them go free). When the Prophet asked Omar for advice, he said: (Kill them for they are fierce enemies of Islam). After listening to the counsel of his two trusted friends and advisors, the Prophet (PBUH) followed the advice of Abou Bakr, but Allah revealed verses in the Qur'an illustrating that the prophet's decision was not correct at the time:

﴿ مَا كَانَتْ لِنَبِيِّ أَنْ يَكُونَ لَهُ أَسْرَى حَتَّى يُثْخِنَ فِي الْأَرْضِ تُرِيدُونَ عَرَصَ

الدُّنْيَا وَاللَّهُ يُرِيدُ الْآخِرَةَ وَاللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴾ [الأنفال: ٦٧]

It is not fitting for a Prophet that he should have prisoners of war until he hath thoroughly subdued the land. Ye look for the temporal goods of this world; but Allah looketh to the Hereafter: and Allah is Exalted in might, Wise.

Al-Anfal 8 : 67

﴿لَوْلَا كِتَابٌ مِّنَ اللَّهِ سَبَقَ لَمَسَّكُمْ فِيمَا أَخَذْتُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ﴾ [الأنفال: ٦٨]

Had it not been for a previous ordainment from Allah, a severe penalty would have reached you for the (ransom) that ye took.

Al-Anfal 8 : 68

﴿فَكُلُوا مِمَّا غَنِمْتُمْ حَلَالًا طَيِّبًا وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ﴾ [الأنفال: ٦٩]

But (now) enjoy what ye took in war, lawful and good: but fear Allah: for Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

Al-Anfal 8 : 69

After these verses were revealed the Prophet (PBUH) told Omar: (We were about to be punished for following an opinion different from your opinion) Narrated by Hakim & Muslim

When his wife Aesha was wrongly accused of adultery, and rumors spread in Madina, the Prophet (PBUH) sought counsel from Usama Bin Zayd and from Ali Bin Abi Talib. Usama said: (we have not heard or known anything wrong about Aesha). Ali said: (Women are plenty. If you wish you can divorce her). It was a difficult time for Prophet Muhammad, but he waited patiently and Aesha waited patiently until Allah revealed verses in Surat An-Nur (chapter 24) exonerating Aesha from any wrong doing and warning the Muslims of the sin of lying and the danger of spreading rumors and of attacking the honor and integrity of innocent Muslims:

﴿إِذْ تَلَقَّوْنَهُ بِأَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَتَقُولُونَ بِأَفْوَاهِكُمْ مَا لَيْسَ لَكُم بِهِ عِلْمٌ وَتَحْسَبُونَهُ هَيِّنًا

وَهُوَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ عَظِيمٌ﴾ [النور: ١٥]

Behold, ye received it on your tongues, and said out of your mouths things of which ye had no knowledge; and ye thought it to be a light matter, while it was most serious in the sight of Allah.

An-Nur 24 : 15

﴿وَلَوْلَا إِذْ سَمِعْتُمُوهُ قُلْتُمْ مَا يَكُونُ لَنَا أَنْ نَتَكَلَّمَ بِهَذَا سُبْحَانَكَ هَذَا بُهْتَانٌ

عَظِيمٌ﴾ [النور: ١٦]

And why did ye not when ye heard it, say "It is not right of us to speak of this: glory to Thee (our Lord) this is a most serious slander!"

An-Nur 24 : 16

﴿يَعِظُكُمُ اللَّهُ أَنْ تَعُودُوا لِمِثْلِهِ أَبَدًا إِنْ كُنْتُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ﴾ [النور: ١٧]

Allah doth admonish you, that ye may never repeat such (conduct), if ye are (true) Believers.

An-Nur 24 : 17

Why is Shura' so important?

Seeking counsel is important because it serves several functions:

- 1- When we seek the advice of those endowed with knowledge and experience we are guided to the truth and avoid making wrong decisions
- 2- Seeking counsel implies that we value and respect the opinion of other people and are not arrogant
- 3- By listening to different points of view we are able to get better insight and be aware of consequences or implications that we may not have thought of
- 4- Seeking counsel allows us to work together and spreads a sense of understanding and cooperation in the community

Omar Bin Al-Khattab said: (Men are three types: The first man is a person who can solve problems on his own; and the second man is a person who finds difficulty in making decisions on his own, and seeks help and advice from others; and the third man is a person who is hesitant and doomed because he does not seek counsel, nor follows good advice) .

Abou Bakr when he faced problems used to search for the answer to that problem in the Book of Allah. If he was unable to find the solution there, he would then turn to the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). If he was unable to find his answer neither in the Qur'an nor in the Sunnah, then he would seek the opinion, counsel and advice of other Muslims, especially those who are learned among them.

Allah in the Qur'an tells us to ask those who possess the knowledge and may be able to guide us:

﴿وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ إِلَّا رَجُلًا نُوحِيَ إِلَيْهِمْ فَسَلُّوا أَهْلَ الدِّكْرِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ لَا

تَعْلَمُونَ﴾ [النحل: ٤٣]

And before thee also the Messengers We sent were but men, to whom We granted inspiration: if ye realise this not, ask of those who possess the Message.

An-Nahl 16 : 43

Allah in the Qur'an also praises those who seek counsel and make decisions after due deliberation among themselves:

﴿وَالَّذِينَ اسْتَجَابُوا لِرَبِّهِمْ وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَأَمْرُهُمْ شُورَى بَيْنَهُمْ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ

يُنْفِقُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾ [الشورى: ٣٨]

Those who hearken to their Lord, and establish regular prayer; who (conduct) their affairs by mutual Consultation; who spend out of what We bestow on them for Sustenance;

Ash-Shura' 42 : 38

Qualities we should look for in those whom we seek their counsel

Those whom we seek counsel from and value their advice should possess certain qualities. Among these qualities :

- 1- They should be righteous and fear Allah. If they understand their accountability to Allah they will be careful and less likely to give wrong counsel
- 2- They should know what they are talking about and have experience and wisdom, and not base their advice on mere conjecture
- 3- They should be wise and give advice only after due consideration. A person who jumps to conclusions and makes rash decisions is likely to mislead and give wrong counsel
- 4- That person should be trustworthy and caring. He or she is not likely to betray the trust placed on them
- 5- They should have nothing to gain and are willing to control their vain desires and egos. Otherwise, their opinion will be tainted and influenced by other factors
- 6- It is natural to seek counsel from those close to us and those we have known and come to trust like our spouses and close friends.

Giving counsel is a duty on Muslims

Since we are trusted to give a honest opinion, we should be faithful to that trust. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: (The person whose counsel is

sought is being trusted to give a sound advice) Narrated by Termedhi & Abou Dawood.

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: (To give sound sincere advice is the essence of religion). His companions asked him: To whom should we give this advice? He said: (To Allah; and to His book; and to His messenger; and to Muslim leaders; and to every common Muslim) Narrated by Muslim.

To give wrong advice knowingly is a sin and is considered being unfaithful to the trust (Amana). Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: (When your Muslim brother seeks your counsel, but you give him the wrong advice knowingly, then you have been unfaithful to his trust in you) Narrated by Ahmad & Hakim.

There is time for consultation, and there is time for action

After due consultation, it is time to make a decision and formulate a plan of action. Once a decision has been made, then everyone should support that decision. It is not allowed at that stage to undermine the effort or criticize the action or disunite the Muslim community. The Qur'an states:

﴿فَإِذَا عَزَمْتَ فَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُتَوَكِّلِينَ﴾ [آل عمران: ١٥٩]

Then, when thou hast taken a decision, put thy trust in Allah. For Allah loves those who put their trust (in Him).

Al-Imran 3 : 159

Many Muslims fail to understand this concept, and continue to criticize an action after a decision has been taken following a period of deliberation and consultation. Such criticism does not help, rather it throws doubts and it may interfere with the sincere efforts of others, or result in disunity and failure. We had a time to voice our objections when our counsel was sought, but once a decision has been taken, then it is time to support that decision, or at least keep quiet and not interfere.

The Qur'an encourages us to work together and cooperate in matters that are of benefit, but not in sin or transgression:

﴿وَتَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْبِرِّ وَالتَّقْوَىٰ ۖ وَلَا تَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْإِثْمِ وَالْعُدْوَانِ ۚ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ شَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ﴾ [المائدة: ٢]

شَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ ﴿٢﴾ [المائدة: ٢]

Help ye one another in righteousness and piety, but help ye not one another in sin and rancour: fear Allah: for Allah is strict in punishment.

Al-Maeda 5 : 2

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