

WE LIVE BY CHOICE, NOT BY CHANCE

ALLAH HAS GIVEN the human being no power greater than choice. In fact, the ability to choose is precisely the trait that makes us the mightiest creature made by God, greater in this respect than even the grandest phenomena in the universe. Yet the irony is it also renders us by far the most vulnerable creation.

The Qur'an affirms this fact in unequivocal terms: "Indeed, We did offer the trust to the heavens, and the earth, and the mountains. But they refused to bear it and were fearful of it. Yet the human being bore it [but could not uphold it]. Indeed, he is most unjust and most ignorant" [33:72].

Man's authority is but two-dimensional, the ability to affirm and reject. That is not a lot of options. Yet from it mushrooms our fundamental freedom, the foundational source of human strength. It swells to such massive proportions because it combines man's two most essential elements, the twin gifts for which Allah conferred honor and superiority upon him over much of creation—namely, human will and the intellectual, or rational, faculty to knowingly execute that will.

And oh how life is full of choices! Hence, the indispensable human need for such a dangerously awesome attribute. For knowingly and unknowingly (and knowledge is literally the problem in a nutshell), we are endlessly engaged in deciding the destiny of so many things, but by which we fate only ourselves.

And change, which is inexorable in the temporal world, also compels choice. And while we human beings are not responsible for change in the world, *per se*, that is, outcomes, we

are fully liable for our choices regarding the change we wish to see happen. This is important because the whole change-choice dynamic would seem a gloomy thing for us mere humans: We have to make choices, but cannot control the change that eventuates in the world from them.

Yet here is another irony, for this is the reason that the current conditions of reality, as presented to us, are not as important as the choices we make regarding them. This realization alone ought to be a major source of hope, an incredible and wonderful motivation for each of us because it means that our burden is lightened, limited to what we purpose in the decisions we take.

That is not to say that human choices do not bring about evil in the world. Indeed, they do. But this result resides in the intention that lines one's choice, and that intention rides completely on knowledge, by which is meant knowledge of the decrees God has promulgated to man in His revelations and by His prophets. This is something human beings have the option to acquire if they care—its final form being that of the Qur'an and Sunnah of Muhammad, *sallallahu alayhe wa salam*. To consider or not consider them is a matter of choice. But self-imposed ignorance is no excuse before God.

It is a pitiable thing, then, that man does not always recognize his ability to learn the will of God and the heritage of man. Rather, he often abuses this access, or chooses to completely ignore it. Willfully he rejects it, or deliberately he refuses to use it. And indeed, it is for these very reasons that the Qur'an

describes man as unjust and ignorant—not merely in the aforementioned verse, but also in many others—especially those narrating the story of creation, which tell, among other things, of Adam's choice to disobey God, then to repent and correct his mistake (verses 2:30-39).

One highly significant lesson Allah wants to teach His servants is that while good choices require solid knowledge about matters at hand and their associated alternatives, this is a necessary but not sufficient condition of right choice. That takes what Islam terms *tafseer*, an intuitive sense in the form of guidance from God: "We said descend from it [Paradise] all together [Adam, his wife and Satan]! Then whenever guidance from Me comes to you—then know that as for those who follow My guidance there shall be no fear upon them nor shall they ever grieve" [2:38].

Without exaggeration, everything in the life of this world and the one-to-come revolves around the choices we make—consciously or otherwise. This is one of the main messages of Islam to humankind. Yet the reality of our Muslim communities in the West flashes that this is a message lost. The fast deteriorating condition of our families and confused youth are glaring indicators of this.

Many Muslims understand that humans live by choice not chance. But we seem oblivious of the depth of its implications as to the profound changes our choices are wreaking on our future, our families, our community—on what has become of the meaning of "us."

Hassen badi

POWER STRUGGLE

BY SALEH ALI

POWER IS INTOXICATING. Once we get a little of it we want more. Like alcohol, it can also be abused. There is a fine line between having the qualities to be a leader and yearning to lead to a fault.

In youth groups around the country and Muslim Students Associations (MSA) at different universities, young Muslim men and women are fighting for volunteer jobs. MSA presidential hopefuls throw verbal jabs at their brother or sister à la the Democratic and Republican candidates. Meetings are disrupted when simple disagreements turn to insults and fighting words. Sisters try to show they belong by challenging the brothers. Banquet and event duties are distributed only to find that some are disgruntled that they didn't get a fair share of the "work."

Has the focus changed? Are we less interested in helping the community as opposed to serving our status in the community? For years I was proud to be a young, active Muslim in America. I attended conferences and saw dozens of people my age at the check-in counter, dishing up dinner and doing security. I went to high school MSA dinners and witnessed the wonders that an in sync group of kids could do. I visited youth groups at various masjid run and attended by the youth themselves.

These days I'm not so proud—not after hearing and witnessing behind the scenes horror stories. Heading an MSA or being the one in charge of

putting a function on have become positions many young Muslims have learned to relish and take a dangerous amount of pride in. It has reached a point where those who do find themselves in those roles look down on others and abuse that power.

An email for volunteers to a major event often attracts twice more than needed. Many *ansar* show up anxious, wondering if their assigned duty will carry sufficient prestige to uphold their honor. It seems the motivation has, indeed, changed. The core intent used to be hope in the reward of Allah for serving the Muslim community. Now, it's often a popularity contest, a forum for arrogance and belittlement.

In Islam, leadership posts aren't something we should sign ourselves up for. "VOTE FOR ME" posters and campaigns are totally against our way. The people appoint leaders. Self-promotion is not needed and, in fact, is a disqualifying condition. It seems to me that most are looking for high-ranking positions for the prestige and to pad the resume, not with the intention of trying to better the Muslim community.

In fairness, some members are in it to change or preserve a certain way of thinking. Zubair, a senior at a university in California that he has asked not to mention, says: "I would say there is more so a difference in methodologies in the board and some of the members."

Nada, a freshman at UC Riverside, agrees: "A really 'liberal' person tries

to reform the MSA and same [goes] for the 'conservatives.'"

If one has to fight for a volunteer role, it's not worth it. It's a sign that the role can be filled without you and that, perhaps, your motives are wrong. "Some actually do it for Allah and the cause at hand, but most just do it to meet guys or girls and flirt," says Nada.

The "role of women" often divides MSAs. So, it's not surprising that sisters in them feel compelled to be treated like the brothers. They want to be the heads of the groups. They want to give orders and make big decisions. They want to give lectures, do PR, and be the face of the group or organization.

Sometimes it is hard for women, and also men, to come to terms with the fact that men and women are simply equal but different. There are biological (as well as social) differences that determine gender roles.

In its' innocence, MSAs, and youth groups around the country have done wonders for our Muslim communities. First because of Allah's blessing then because of hard working, dedicated young people. Those people had the intention of pleasing Allah and making our communities better. They were less concerned about their high status in the eyes of others and swelling their chests with self-importance.

So the next time you flock to your local masjid to volunteer for the next big event, stop and ask yourself. Why am I doing this? ▲

BECAUSE YOU'RE WORTH IT

BY AMANY SULEIMAN

A BULLY ONCE said to a scrawny, little boy: "Give me all your money, twerp!" The third grader replied, scared out of his mind: "I-I don't have any money, Mr. Bully, sir." The bully stopped, shocked, and, still holding on tightly to the boy's shirt, sharply asked him: "What did you call me?" "Um... M-M-Mr. Bully, sir?" The bully took his gaze away from the victim, looking past the swings, the slide, and the seesaws to the clear blue sky ahead. He thought for a moment, turned to the boy, released his grip, smiled, and said: "No one has ever called me that before."

Human beings want nothing more than to be accepted. Self-image, outer appearance, and the way we carry ourselves all make a difference in how we are perceived, judged, and, in turn, treated by our fellows.

We learn that genetics plays a huge role in shaping our physical appearance. Similarly, because we are born with an innate nature to believe in the One God and to recognize truth from falsehood, one can say that our "inherent" genetic make up is also responsible for our *spiritual* growth. Nor can we forget that, along with our biological inheritance, our physical development highly depends on the environment we are brought up in. Thus, we have no reason to disbelieve that our spiritual growth is similarly affected.

All well and good, but what happens when, in the process of growing, one is subjected to subtle, but constant condemnation—always being told, in one way or another: *You are different. You don't belong.*

Just like you have a right to eat, drink, and breathe, you are also enti-



led to mature fully at every stage of your life. There is room for interruption, but only as much as will not stunt that growth. Disturbances beyond this prove to be oppression in its most subtle but effective form.

The result of this negativity is obvious in the Muslim world of *hijab*, which is now the most outward and clear proclamation of Islam as a faith. For some, it is an easy, fulfilling task. For others, it is a test of *iman*.

Like a flag proudly identifies its

country with its unfurled display of distinct colors and design, a scarf wrapped around one's head in America screams loud and clear: *I am a Muslim.*

The response: Years of sideways looks, whispers, and overenthusiastic, forced *hellos* from the world in which one lives, but is never really accepted as a natural part of. When one does not hear, "Go back to your country!" or "Get that rag off your head!" one feels those same messages radiated through the hesitant eyes and the uneasy facial muscles that emerge with every dutiful smile.

It is hard growing up feeling different. But it is pure emotional *torture* when your difference makes you a weirdo in the society you live in.

A friend of mine regularly attends an all-women's gym, but still works out in *hijab* and a long-sleeved shirt. Why, you ask? Because sometimes the male instructor is in the gym, providing his oh-so-needed services to the community (the show simply cannot go on without him. Thank you, Joe!) and because—for "security reasons"—management won't let my friend close the blinds. In the end, the overall mood of the interaction is not disappointment on the club's end for being unable to accommodate this dedicated client. Instead, it is my friend's fault for the persistence of this unresolved situation: She has imposed this burden upon herself. Deal with it.

The politically correct side of our world agrees with the Arby's slogan: "Different is Good." But the gut-feeling part of our society can't bring itself to celebrate the differences that come with believing in one God. Both our secular inhabitants and, interestingly, many of our believing members are found guilty on this count.

For years, many of us *hijabis* were among the very few students in public schools who could speak another language besides English. (Not a big deal.) Growing up, we were exposed to multiple cultures: American, the customs

HIJAB À LA ZIRYAB

BY SOBIA ASRAR

DESPITE WEARING THE veil for 10 years now, encounters with *hijab*-wearing sisters continually prove me unschooled in the fine art of *hijab* styles. Their conversations, peppered with mentions of hoodie and turban head coverings, and overcoats named after anything from Gulf states to an insect, sound nearly foreign, both in term and concept.

Not unlike any novice in the world of vogue, I feel overwhelmed by their extensive how-to knowledge and their zealous attempts to fuse chic with faith. The strategically designed scarves that let bare one's chandelier earrings and avant-garde, snug and embellished ensembles whose modesty they highlight, force me to grapple with the phenomenon of "*hijab* fashion".

Many take offense at calling that an oxymoron. But does it not seem a fitting description of a phrase that ties an act of worship for all, to a word representing Ziriyab-inspired, seasonally changing clothing styles of the elite trendsetters?

What is worse, fashion thrives in our slavish imitation of a culture that imposes, at its whim, higher hemlines or demure tunics now that "sex is starting to look very last season," in the words of *London Times* fashion editor Lisa Armstrong. Or even a distinct feminine touch in men's clothing, flooding runways and our youth's closets, though many elders neglect to rail against it.

But, most importantly, fashion is entrenched in a person's desire to look glamorous. By creating a fashion industry for what literally translates to mean "barrier," I fear a failing in assuring all Muslim women that the *hijab* that covers is *forever* in, and the

woman who dons it is always beautiful. Instead, we find fault with veils that fall from head to toe and instruct sisters to look their best by keeping their "face shapes" in mind when selecting *hijabs*.

And so, the usual incensed debate on the controversial dimensions of *hijab* (face, hands, body, etc) has been replaced by the arguments of those who insist that the *hijab* must vary in style, for it never came to make its wearer less beautiful.

Of course it didn't.

But then again, why are we talking about beauty, which itself is defined differently from one society and time to another?

The *hijab* isn't about increasing or decreasing one's attractiveness. Neither did it come to accentuate our features or turn us into an eyesore. It is ordained on the basis that every woman is beautiful, that every woman deserves respect as a modest, "known" Muslimah [33:59]. We never needed Dove ads to make us appreciate women's real beauty. Islam already taught us that we are "in the best of stature" [95:4], so long as we believe in Allah's Oneness unflinchingly, and do the deeds of goodness wherever we find they need doing.

So, when people claim that to be presentable to society, we must complement our dual-colored *hijab* with a touch of makeup and some sequins, they seem to forget what their dress code actually symbolizes.

The *hijab* isn't just sartorial, but a state of mind. When we start to believe that to cover more is beautiful is precisely when we truly understand *hijab*. For it is only a cloth, something

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I USED TO KNOW A HEIDI

On Preserving a Feminine Portrait

BY AHMAD HALEEM

CAPTAIN AHMAD! CAPTAIN Ahmad! Her little Arabic voice reflected from the great stone walls of the villa, flitting through the shutters of my balcony and into my room. Waking me from my early afternoon siesta, sweet intonations gently pushed me from the bed that I had retired upon earlier in the day.

It was her and I knew it. Like the white rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*, I flew to the balcony thinking that I was late and had missed her! *For how long had she been calling me? Perhaps she was there, hanging over her own window ledge for an hour, two maybe? I'm late, oh dear, I shall be late!*

With these thoughts ricocheting about my mind, I reached the ledge of my balcony, my crow's nest from where I could see my friend Heidi, that petite little girl that had everyday managed to converse with me using what limited English she had learned from the British language school she skipped off to every year. I did my part in the cross-cultural dialogue, stumbling through my Arabic skills, trying to let her understand my thoughts—my innocent feelings for her, mind you. I was twelve. She even younger.

I peered through the sweltering Egyptian sun, relieved to see her, leaning precariously from her window, her dark brown locks sweeping from side to side. I was overjoyed to feel, once again, that warm feeling

that filled my insides like a hot air balloon. It was not so much her bright face that got me. It was her voice, the medium through which her gentle feminine soul found my center and delicately touched it, moving it to higher grounds.

And that was how it was, nearly every single day of that magical sum-

mer that I spent abroad. Heidi, a charming yet mysterious brunette, somehow managed to call out to me around four in the afternoon from the villa next door, and I would somehow manage to man my balcony and complete the settings for a lovely yet oddly satisfying dialogue under the Cairo sun.

I could have spoken to her forever, perpetually living that feeling of the noblest form of affection, doing a woman a good, doing my soul no wrong. But as we all know too well, this was a far-fetched fancy, that I would forever live such innocence, love a girl for her true *feminesque*, the essence of her female soul, rather than for her womanly physique. How far this was from a fast-approaching reality, just a dream.

The truth is that I "grew up," if you would call it growth, or any other word that might connote a sense of positive development, of maturity.

Flying across the great span of the Atlantic back to my home, Heidi was quickly hidden in the depths of my thoughts, blanketed by a fast-approaching world of glamour, of shining smiles that made my insides wriggle with excitement. My matu-

