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Human rights celebrated during Muharram

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Photo By Mayra Beltran/Chronicle

Muslims surround the replica of a shrine in Karbala, a tomb for Imam Hussein's brother Abbas, during the Ashura Procession in downtown Houston. The event commemorates the martyrdom of Hussein, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad, in 680 A.D.

During the month of Muharram, [Anjum Bilgrami](#) makes extra visits to his mosque, reviews special readings in the Quran and prays for the rights of people everywhere, especially civilians injured and killed during the ongoing Gaza conflict.

Muharram, which began Dec. 29 and runs through January, means many things in the Muslim world: It is the beginning of the Islamic liturgical New Year, one of four holy months, and the month following the Hajj, when Muslims make their pilgrimage to Mecca.

To Bilgrami and other Shia Muslims, it is also a month of mourning for the death of Imam Hussein, grandson of the prophet Muhammad. He and his family were killed in 680 A.D. on the plains of Karbala in modern-day Iraq, an event now observed on Ashura, the 10th day of the month.

Hussein's family and 72 followers were on their way to Kufa, where Hussein was to become spiritual leader. While camping by the banks of the Euphrates they were surrounded by the local Umayyad rulers and on the 10th day were attacked. All were killed, except for one of Hussein's sisters who lived to tell the story.

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"His story still lasts, while mighty emperors who built pyramids and temples are forgotten," said Bilgrami. "If it was not based on piety and righteousness, his story would not have lasted this long."

All Muslims are saddened by his tragic death, writes **Karen Armstrong** in her book, *Islam*. But the Shia's (or followers of Ali, Hussein's father) see it as a sign of life's injustices.

In many people's minds, Hussein became a martyr, a man who died for his beliefs and is now considered an early human rights advocate, sometimes comparing him to **Martin Luther King Jr.** and Gandhi.

"The governments of the world are often against the people of the world it seems," Bilgrami said. "But if you protest, you shouldn't have to die for it."

Over the centuries, Muharram and Ashura became a way that Shia Muslims renewed their faith, he said.

This year Ashura fell on Jan. 7, and Bilgrami joined the annual march held in downtown Houston for the last 15 years. The black-clad crowd, who tapped their chests with closed fists, a sign of mourning, seemed bigger this year. Many in the crowd were praying for a cease-fire in the recent Gaza conflict that started in late December and killed more than 1,000 people.

In years past, marchers prayed for the fall of **Saddam Hussein** and others who violated human rights.

"During Muharram, we go to the mosque and listen to the stories," said Naz Bilgrami. "It's a carryover from then, because how would we know if (his sister) hadn't told their story? It's amazing that it even now applies to what is going on in the world."

In an article published on the Web site IslamiCity.com, **Dawud Walid** reminds readers that: Muslims should not only pray for the people of Gaza, but remember that "Muslims must always stand for the truth and justice and resist falsehood and oppression even when committed by Muslims ..."

Prayers, he added, should be made for thousands of Muslims killed by other Muslims in Darfur. American Muslims should also be praying for and helping the poor and suffering in the inner city.

The first 10 days of the month are the most intense. Besides prayers, programs and lectures are given in Urdu, Arabic and English.

After the first 10 days, people also gather in homes for discussions, Bilgrami said.

At the **Al-Hadi School of Accelerative Learning**, attached to the **Islamic Education Center**, principal **Sami Hijazi** said the children traditionally reenact Ashura's events, but also discuss modern-day issues.

"We talk about those who are being oppressed and those who are oppressors," Hijazi said. He wants students to connect with the poor in this country, too.

In the past few months, high school students have gathered on Saturdays to put together bags of food and clothes for the homeless. Their efforts double during the month of Muharram, he said.

"We ask the children to come up with solutions and ways to help others," Hijazi said. "The message of Hussein is to stand for freedom and justice and for those less fortunate. There are many different ways to do that."

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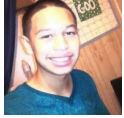
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