

The Cohesive Nature of the Family

(part 1 of 4): Introduction



God says in the Quran—in a passage that the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, used to repeat often when he would begin his speeches:

“O mankind! Be dutiful to your Lord, Who created you from a single person, and from him He created his wife, and from them both He created many men and women and fear God through Whom you demand your mutual (rights), and (do not cut the relations of) the wombs (kinship). Surely, God is Ever an All-Watcher over you” (Quran 4:1)

The family is the nucleus of society as a whole. If the family is on a sound foundation, it is more likely that society as a whole will be in a good state. Thus, in general, the messengers of God, the prime examples for humans, adhered to this institution of marriage and family. God states,

“Verily, We have sent messenger before you and appointed for them spouses and children...” (Quran 13:38)

The Prophet Muhammad also established marriage as his way of life, saying:

“By God, I am the most fearful of God of you and I have the most piety; however, I fast and break my fast, pray [at night] and sleep and I marry

women. Whoever turns away from my *sunnah*^[1] is not of me.” (Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim)

Undoubtedly, Islam puts a great emphasis on family relations and cohesion. Scholars of Islamic Law have noted that when one studies the laws found in Islam and what seems to be the wisdom behind them, one finds that they have been laid down to establish, protect, reinforce and perpetuate specific necessities of life. The necessities of life as envisioned by Islamic Law are:

- (1) religion,
- (2) life,
- (3) familial ties and relationships,
- (4) mental capacity and
- (5) wealth and property.

Thus, for example, one need only ponder over the stringent laws related to the preservation of the sanctity of the family to understand the great emphasis that Islam places on the family. In the “modern West,” nowadays, for example, adultery and other acts that strike at the very foundation of a family are not considered crimes.^[2] In Islam, the situation is very different. Islam exhorts all the members of a family to treat each other well while avoiding promiscuous acts that are evil in themselves and harmful to any marriage. God says, for example:

“And come not near to the unlawful sexual intercourse. Verily, it is a greatly lewd act, and an evil way.” (Quran 17:32)

However, these exhortations are not simply hollow words. Instead, they are also backed up with the force of law for some of the most egregious acts that cannot be overlooked. Thus, God commands:

“The woman and the man guilty of illegal sexual intercourse, flog each of them with a hundred stripes. Let not pity withhold you in their case, in a punishment prescribed by God, if you believe in God and the Last Day. And let a party of the believers witness their punishment.” (Quran 24:2)

Pity is not allowed to overrule what must be done, because in the end, that pity—and pity is something which drives someone to do good to others—will lead to evil results. Furthermore, in a saying of the Prophet recorded by al-Bukhari and Muslim, it is confirmed that he ordered stoning to death for the adulterer. In fact, Islam goes well beyond that to protect the sanctity of the family: those who falsely accuse chaste women of such evil deeds are also to receive severe punishments. God says:

“And those who accuse chaste women, and produce not four witnesses, flog them with eighty stripes, and reject their testimony forever, they indeed are the disobedient to God.” (Quran 24:4)

In particular, God offers guidance to humankind concerning behavior with all of the members of the family. For the sake of brevity, this short article shall prevent an overview of the proper behavior of a Muslim toward the other members of his family, including parents, children, spouses and other relatives.

The Parents

God has demanded that Muslims treat their parents in the best possible fashion. Muslims must be grateful people. They must be grateful to God and to all who do them well. After God, there is perhaps no one who deserves a person’s gratitude more than his parents. Thus, numerous verses of the Quran touch upon the question of the treatment of parents. Indeed, in more than one place, God has closely tied good behavior towards parents with the command to worship Him alone. Note, for example, the following verse of the Quran:

“Worship God and join none with Him in worship, and do good to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, the poor, the neighbour who is near of kin, the neighbour who is a stranger, the companion by your side, the wayfarer (you meet), and those (slaves) whom your right hands possess. Verily, Allah does not like such as are proud and boastful” (Quran 4:36)

God also says:

“Say (O Muhammad): Come, I will recite what your Lord has prohibited you from: Join not anything in worship with Him; be good and dutiful to your parents...” (Quran 6:151)

“And your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him. And that you be dutiful to your parents. If one of them or both of them attain old age in your life, say not to them a word of disrespect, nor shout at them but address them in terms of honor. And lower unto them the wing of submission and humility through mercy, and say: ‘My Lord! Bestow on them Your Mercy as they did foster me when I was small.’ Your Lord knows best what is in your inner-selves. If you are righteous, then, verily, He is Ever Most Forgiving to those who turn unto Him again and again in obedience, and in repentance.” (Quran 17:23-25)

“And (remember) when We took a covenant from the Children of Israel, (saying): Worship none but God (Alone) and be dutiful and good to parents...” (Quran 2:83)

The Prophet also emphasized good treatment of one's parents, putting it after prayer in its proper time as a deed that is most beloved to God: The Prophet was asked:

“What deed is the most beloved to God?” He replied, “Prayer in its proper time.” He was asked, “Then what deed?” He replied, “Being dutiful to one’s parents...” (Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim)

God reminds the believers that their parents, in particular the mother, went through a great deal of hardship and effort to raise their child and therefore they are deserving of love, respect and gratitude in return. God says:

“And (remember) when Luqman said to his son when he was advising him, ‘O my son! Join not in worship others with God. Verily! Joining others in worship with God is a great wrong indeed.’ And We have enjoined on man (to be dutiful and good) to his parents. His mother bore him in weakness and hardship upon weakness and hardship, and his weaning is in two years give thanks to Me and to your parents, unto Me is the final destination.” (Quran 31:13-14)

“And We have enjoined on man to be dutiful and kind to his parents. His mother bears him with hardship and she brings him forth with hardship, and the bearing of him, and the weaning of him is thirty months, till when he attains full strength and reaches forty years, he says: ‘My Lord! Grant me the power and ability that I may be grateful for Your Favor which You have bestowed upon me and upon my parents, and that I may do righteous good deeds, such as please You, and make my off-spring good. Truly, I have turned to You in repentance, and truly, I am one of the Muslims (submitting to Your Will).’” (Quran 46:15)

Thus, in particular, the mother is deserving of the greatest friendship and closeness from her children. The Prophet was once asked:

“Who among the people has the most right for my good companionship?” The Prophet replied, “Your mother.” The man asked, “And then whom?” The Prophet replied again, “Your mother.” The man again asked, “And then whom?” the Prophet once again said, “Your mother.” The man asked once more, “And then whom?” This time the Prophet said, “Your father.” (Saheeh Muslim)

Footnotes:

[1] *Sunnah: Teachings and Way.* (IslamReligion)

[2] In 1969, an English judge told a plaintiff who complained about his wife's behavior with a friend of his that his thinking was old-fashioned and that he has to realize that he is now living in 1969. [That story was quoted in Yoosuf al-Aalim, *Al-Maqaasid al-Aaammah li-l-Shareeah al-Islaamiyyah* (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 1994), p. 397.] Today, there are countless disputes between husbands and wives wherein the husband denies that the children they have in their household are his, causing hatred, friction and destruction in the marriage. One can rightfully ask: Is this how a "modern, civilized" marriage or family is supposed to be?

(part 2 of 4): The Role of Husband and Wife

The Spouse[1]

Marriage is a very important institution in Islam. The Quran shows that there is a clear bond between men and women. In numerous places in the Quran, God reminds humans that they are from the same original human being. It is through this bond that they are interconnected and through these bonds that some of their rights upon one another are established. God states at the opening of Chapter 4, entitled "The Women":

"O mankind! Be dutiful to your Lord, Who created you from a single person, and from him He created his wife, and from them both He created many men and women and fear God through whom you demand your mutual (rights), and (do not cut the relations of) the wombs (kinship)! Surely, God is Ever an All-Watcher over you." (Quran 4:1)

However, beyond the beginning that the two sexes have in common, God points out that the love and affection that He has created in the hearts of the spouses towards another is one of His great signs that act as portents for those people of understanding. In other words, such people can look at this aspect of creation and be reminded of the greatness of God's work and power, the perfection of His creation and the magnificent mercy God has placed in this world. God says:

"And among His Signs is this, that He created for you wives from among yourselves, that you may find repose and comfort in them, and He has put between you affection and mercy. Verily, in that are indeed Signs for a people who reflect." (Quran 39:21)

God also says:

"He it is who created you from a single person (Adam), and then He has created from him his wife, in order that he might enjoy the pleasure of living with her..." (Quran 7:189)

Thus, according to the Quran, the relationship between a man and his wife should be one of love, mercy and mutual understanding. God also commands men to treat their wives kindly in the verse:

**“...And consort with your wives in a goodly manner, for if you dislike them, it may well be that your dislike something which God might yet make a source of abundant good.”
(Quran 4:19)**

A few words about the purpose of marriage in Islam should be given. This is needed because many times people enter into marriage or desire to get married without realizing the roles and purpose of marriage itself. In turn, they do not realize the kinds of responsibilities that will be on their shoulders when they do get married. However, if the purposes of marriage are known and the responsibilities that marriage will entail are understood at the outset, once again, the probability that the marriage will be a successful marriage will be enhanced. The person will know what is expected of him, both with respect to his responsibilities and duties and his rights.

Obviously, the purpose of marriage is not simply “fun” or the release of “animal urges”. There is much more to marriage than that. Some of the goals behind marriage include^[2]: procreating, experiencing permissible physical pleasure, attainment of one’s complete maturity, mutually assisting one another in making one’s life in this world, attaining numerous psychological and physiological benefits, forming the cornerstone of a moral society, bringing up the next generation in a setting that is most conducive for moral and spiritual growth and binding peoples and families together.

The Rights of a Husband and a Wife

In order for a marriage to work best, each partner should understand fully well his or her rights, responsibilities, roles and obligations. For this reason, Islamic Law has laid down very clear rights and responsibilities for a Muslim husband and wife. At the same time, though, every married person must realize that one’s spouse is first and foremost another Muslim. He/she is one’s brother/sister in Islam. Therefore, all the rights that fall upon a Muslim due to the general brotherhood of Islam are also due to one’s spouse. There are books on the behavior of a Muslim, brotherhood and love and loyalty among Muslims, and all of those principles apply to a married person as his spouse is part of that Islamic brotherhood and community. Furthermore, the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, also stressed this point when he stated:

“None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.” (Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim)

However, one’s spouse has even more rights upon a person due to the great and important contract that has been contracted between them.^[3]

Therefore, when discussing the rights of the husbands and wives, this matter should not be looked at in a cold or legal fashion. The relationship between the husband and wife must be much more than a matter of rights stated by the law that each must abide by. Instead, it should be a relationship of love, support and mutual understanding. Each spouse should take into consideration the needs and abilities of the other spouse. They should attempt to make each other happy, even if they have to compromise sometimes, and not simply be out to make sure that they are getting all of their rights in the marriage. Actually, it is usually the case that neither spouse is completely fulfilling the rights of the other and making the other happy. Hence, they both have to realize and accept their shortcomings.

The Prophet, in particular, advised the husbands to treat their wives in the best way— perhaps due to their greater authority or due to their greater strength, in general. The Prophet said:

“The best of you is the one who is best to his family (wife) and I am the best of you to my family.” (*Al-Tirmidhi and ibn Majah*)

Footnotes:

[1] For more details on the Islamic laws of marriage, see the author’s “The Fiqh of the Family, Marriage and Divorce” (American Open University, 1997), *passim*. The discussion here is based on sections of that work.

[2] Cf., Abdul Rahman Abdul Khaaliq, *Al-Zawaaj fi Dhill al-Islaam* (Kuwait: al-Daar al-Salafiyyah, 1988), pp. 21ff.

[3] God says in the Quran, “**And how could you take it [back] while you have gone in unto each other and they have taken from you a firm and strong covenant**” (Quran 4:21).

(part 3 of 4): Mutual Rights of the Spouses

Actually, both spouses, in general, fail to some extent in their fulfilling of the other’s obligations. Hence, before criticizing the other or being harsh with the other due to some shortcoming, the person should look to himself and realize what wrong he himself is doing.

At the same time, though, Islamic Law has clearly laid down some rights and responsibilities so that both parties in the marriage know exactly what is expected of them and know what they need to fulfill to be a proper spouse. Thus, for example, God says:

“...And they [women] have rights [over their husbands] similar to those over them according to what is reasonable...” (Quran 2:228)

In sum, the rights of the wife or the obligations of the husband include, among others, the following:

(1) Receiving her proper dower: God says:

“And give the women their dower with a good heart; but if they, of their own good pleasure, remit any part of it to you, take it and enjoy it without fear of any harm.” (Quran 4:4)

(2) Being fully and completely financially maintained by her husband: God says:

“Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means...” (Quran 4:34)

Furthermore, in a hadeeth recorded by al-Bukhari and Muslim, the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, told Hind bint Utbah, when she complained that her husband (Abu Sufyan) was very stingy and was not maintaining her and she asked if she could take from his wealth without his knowledge:

“Take what is sufficient for you and your child, according to what is customary.”

(3) Being treated in a proper and kind manner: God states:

“...And consort with your wives in a goodly manner, for if you dislike them, it may well be that you dislike something which God might yet make a source of abundant good” (Quran 4:19)

(4) Having the right to sexual intercourse: In the *Sahih* of Ibn Hibban there is the following narration:

The wife of Uthman ibn Madh’oon complained to the Messenger of God that her husband had no need for women. During the day, he would fast and at night, he would pray. The Prophet asked him, “Am I not the best example for you to follow?” He answered, “Certainly, may my father and mother be sacrificed for you.” The Messenger of God then told him, “As for you, you pray during the night and you fast during the day. Certainly, your wife has a right upon you. And your body has a right upon you. So pray and sleep and fast and break your fast.”

(5) Having the right to “privacy”: Note the following hadeeth of the Prophet:

“Is there any man among you who goes to his wife, closes the door behind then, covers themselves, and conceals themselves by God’s concealing.” They said, “Yes.” He then said, “Then he sits after that [with others] and he says, ‘I did this and that.’” They were silent. He then turned to the women and said, “Do you any of you talk about such things?” They were also silent. Then a young girl came up on his toes so the Prophet could see her and hear her and she said, “O Messenger of God, they [the men] certainly talk about it and they [the women] also talk about it.” He said, “Do you know what they are like? They are like a female devil who met a devil in the street and they satisfied their desires with the people looking on.”^[1]

(6) The right to being taught or learning her religion.

On the other hand, the rights of the husband or the responsibilities of the women include:

(1) Being the head of the household: God has said:

**“Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means...”
(Quran 4:34)**

Although this is usually stated as a *right* of the husband, it is actually a heavy responsibility on his shoulders, as it means that he has the responsibility to guide his family and keep them along the straight path.

(2) Having the right to be obeyed: This goes with the first right. A person cannot be the head of something if he has no authority.

(3) Having his wife answer his call to meet his sexual needs.

(4) That the wife will not allow anyone in his house except by his permission: In a hadeeth recorded in al-Bukhari and Muslim, the Messenger of God said:

“Do not allow anyone into his house except by permission.”

If the husband and wife enter into the marriage with the right intention of pleasing God and pleasing each other, recognizing their roles and responsibilities in the marriage and treating each other with proper Islamic behavior, God willing, their union will be a blessed union that will stretch from this life into the Hereafter.

Having said what was just said about marriage, Islam, though, is also a practical religion. It takes into consideration all possible common scenarios. It is possible for a man and woman to enter into a union with good intentions yet their personalities and likes simply do not coincide with one another. There are times in which a good marriage simply cannot be achieved and the spouses enter into a state of misery. Under such circumstances, Islamic law allows for

an end to the marriage and their suffering.^[2] The goal is to either stay together in a friendly manner or to separate in a goodly manner. Thus, for example, God says:

“And when you have divorced women and they have fulfilled the term of their prescribed period, either take them back on reasonable basis or set them free on reasonable basis...” (Quran 2:231)

God also says:

“Then when they are about to fulfill their term appointed [bringing an end to the divorce], either take them back in a good manner or part with them in a good manner...” (Quran 65:2)

Obviously, divorce is not a desired goal or a light matter. In a perfect world, all married couples would be in bliss. However, there are times in which this option is the best for all parties concerned. Thus, the option of divorce is in accord with the overall goal of preserving the family—it is not simply quantity, though, such that all marriages always stay in tact, that is desired but quality.

Footnotes:

^[1] *Abu Dawud.*

^[2] Unfortunately, in some Muslim cultures today, divorce has become so “shameful” they have neglected this important guidance of Islamic Law, leading to spouses suffering in silence. This is definitively not the goal of Islamic Law concerning such issues.

(part 4 of 4): Children and Relatives

The Children

It is clear from many verses in the Quran that having children is considered a blessing from God. Hence, God says while recounting some of his blessings upon humankind:

“God has made for you wives of your own kind, and has made for you, from your wives, sons and grandsons, and has bestowed on you good provision. Do they then believe in false deities and deny the Favor of God (by not worshipping God Alone).” (Quran 16:72)

Thus, one finds the prophet Zachariah praying to God that He bestow upon him children (Quran 3:38). In addition, having children is something known to be beloved to parents. Thus, God says:

“Wealth and children are the adornment of the life of this world...” (Quran 18:46)

At the same time, though, every parent must realize that having children is a great responsibility and trial from God. God has said:

“Your wealth and your children are only a trial, whereas God—with Him is a great reward (Paradise).” (Quran 64:15)

God also says,

“O you who believe, guard yourselves and your families from the Hell-fire whose fuel is men and stones...” (Quran 66:6)

The meaning of this verse was reiterated by the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, when he said:

“All of you are shepherds and all of you will be asked about your wards... The man is responsible for his household and will be asked about his responsibilities. The wife will be asked about the house of her husband and her responsibilities.”^[1]

Islam, therefore, fills the human with appreciation for being blessed with a child while at the same time realizing that this child is a heavy responsibility. The parents must care for the child and bring the child up in the best possible manner, trying to protect the child from the Hellfire.

Muslim scholars consider that the rights of children appear long before they are even conceived, via the selection of a pious and righteous spouse. This is the first step in providing a good household and environment for the child. Around the time of the child’s birth, there are other important obligations, such as giving the child a good name and offering an animal sacrifice on the child’s behalf.^[2] Beyond that, the most important rights of the child include:

- (1) being maintained and provided for in a healthy manner;
- (2) being taught the tenets of the religion;
- (3) being treated with compassion and mercy;
- (4) being just among multiple siblings; and
- (5) having a good example set for them by their parents.

Other Relatives

A family also includes siblings and other kinfolk. Islam has certainly not ignored any of the relatives of an individual. In numerous places in the Quran, God emphasizes the importance of treating one’s relatives in a good and kindly fashion. God says, for example:

“Worship God and join none with Him in worship, and do good to parents, kinsfolk...” (Quran 4:36)

God also speaks about spending on one’s relatives:

“They ask you (O Muhammad) what they should spend. Say: Whatever you spend of good must be for parents and kindred...” (Quran 2:215)

God also says:

“It is not piety that you turn your faces towards east and (or) west (in prayers); but Al-piety is (the quality of) the one who believes in God, the Last Day, the Angels, the Book, the Prophets and gives his wealth, in spite of love for it, to the kinsfolk...” (Quran 2:177)

The Prophet Muhammad was requested:

“Inform me of a deed that will take me closer to Paradise and distance me from the Hell-fire.” He replied, “Worship God and do not ascribe any partner to Him, establish the prayer, give the zakat and keep the ties of kinship.”^[3]

Keeping the ties of kinship refers to doing good towards them with one’s speech, actions and wealth. It includes kind words, visits, charity and generosity. It also includes keeping any harm from coming to them and doing one’s best to bring happiness to them.

The Muslim must understand that keeping the ties of kinship is an obligation and not simply a meritorious act. In the Quran, God praises those...

“...who join that which God has commanded to be joined (i.e. they are good to their relatives and do not sever the bond of kinship), fear their Lord, and dread the terrible reckoning” (Quran 13:21)

The Prophet said:

“The one who cuts off the ties of kinship will not enter Paradise.”^[4]

Islam has emphasized every type of familial tie possible. It has provided guidance showing the importance of the ties with parents, children, spouses and other relatives. It exhorts every Muslim to fulfill these ties to receive God’s pleasure in return. In addition (although not completely stressed in this short paper), it has provided laws and strict regulations that allow the individual to realize how best to keep the proper ties with all of his or her kith and kin.

Footnotes:

[1] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim.*

[2] In this sacrifice, called the *aqeeqah*, meat is distributed to the poor, one's family, and friends and neighbors (IslamReligion).

[3] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim.*

[4] *Saheeh Muslim.*