

Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman

"If you wish you may consider yourself among the Muhajirin or, if you wish, you may consider yourself one of the Ansar. Choose whichever is dearer to you."

With these words, the Prophet, peace be upon him, addressed Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman when he met him for the first time in Makkah. How did Hudhayfah come to have this choice'?

His father, al-Yaman was a Makkan from the tribe of Abs. He had killed someone and had been forced to leave Makkah. He had settled down in Yathrib, becoming an ally (halif) of the Banu al-Ash-hal and marrying into the tribe. A son named Hudhayfah was born to him. The restrictions on his returning to Makkah were eventually lifted and he divided his time between Makkah and Yathrib but stayed more in Yathrib and was more attached to it.

This was how Hudhayfah had a Makkan origin but a Yathribite upbringing. When the rays of Islam began to radiate over the Arabian peninsula, a delegation from the Abs tribe, which included al-Yaman, went to the Prophet and announced their acceptance of Islam. That was before the Prophet migrated to Yathrib.

Hudhayfah grew up in a Muslim household and was taught by both his mother and father who were among the first persons from Yathrib to enter the religion of God. He therefore became a Muslim before meeting the Prophet, peace be upon him.

Hudhayfah longed to meet the Prophet. From an early age, he was keen on following whatever news there was about him. The more he heard, the more his affection for the Prophet grew and the more he longed to meet him.

He eventually journeyed to Makkah, met the Prophet and put the question to him, "Am I a muhajir or am I an Ansari, O Rasulallah?"

"If you wish you may consider yourself among the muhajirin, or if you wish you may consider yourself one of the Ansar. Choose whichever is dearer to you," replied the Prophet. "Well, I am an Ansari. O Rasulallah," decided Hudhayfah.

At Madinah, after the Hijrah, Hudhayfah became closely attached to the Prophet. He participated in all the military engagements except Badr. Explaining why he missed the Battle of Badr, he said: "I would not have missed Badr if my father and I had not been outside Madinah. The disbelieving Quraysh met us and asked where we were going. We told them we were going to Madinah and they asked whether we intended to meet Muhammad. We insisted that we only wanted to go to Madinah. They allowed us to go only after they extracted from us an undertaking not to help Muhammad against them and not to fight along with them.

"When we came to the Prophet we told him about our undertaking to the Quraysh and asked him what should we do. He said that we should ignore the undertaking and seek God's help against them."

Hudhayfah participated in the Battle of Uhud with his father. The pressure on Hudhayfah during the battle was great but he acquitted himself well and emerged safe and sound. A rather different fate, however, awaited his father.

Before the battle, the Prophet, peace be on him, left alYaman, Hudhayfah's father, and Thabit ibn Waqsh with the other non-combatants including women and children. This was because they were both quite old. As the fighting grew fiercer, al-Yaman said to his friend: "You have no father (meaning you have no cares).

What are we waiting for? We both have only a short time to live. Why don't we take our swords and join the Messenger of God, peace be on him? Maybe, God will bless us with martyrdom beside His Prophet."

They quickly prepared for battle and were soon in the thick of the fighting. Thabit ibn Waqsh was blessed with shahadah at the hands of the mushrikin. The father of Hudhayfah, however was set upon by some Muslims who did not recognize who he was. As they flayed him, Hudhayfah cried out: "My father! My father! It's my father!"

No one heard him. The old man fell, killed in error by the swords of his own brothers in faith. They were filled with pain and remorse. Grieved as he was, Hudhayfah said to them: "May God forgive you for He is the most Merciful of those who show mercy."

The Prophet, peace be on him, wanted diyah (compensation) to be paid to Hudhayfah for the death of his father but Hudhayfah said: "He was simply seeking shahadah and he attained it. O Lord, bear witness that I donate the compensation for him to the Muslims."

Because of this attitude, Hudhayfah's stature grew in the eyes of the Prophet, peace be on him. Hudhayfah had three qualities which particularly impressed the Prophet: his unique intelligence which he employed in dealing with difficult situations; his quick wittedness and spontaneous response to the call of action, and his ability to keep a secret even under persistent questioning.

A noticeable policy of the Prophet was to bring out and use the special qualities and strengths of each individual companion of his. In deploying his companions, he was careful to choose the right man for the right task. This he did to excellent advantage in the case of Hudhayfah.

One of the gravest problems the Muslims of Madinah had to face was the existence in their midst of hypocrites (munafiqun) particularly from among the Jews and their allies. Although many of them had declared their acceptance of Islam, the change was only superficial and they continued to plot and intrigue against the Prophet and the Muslims.

Because of Hudhayfah's ability to keep a secret, the Prophet, peace be on him, confided in him the names of the munafiqin. It was a weighty secret which the Prophet did not disclose to any other of his companions. He gave Hudhayfah the task of watching the movements of the munafiqin, following their activities, and shielding the Muslims from the sinister danger they represented. It was a tremendous responsibility. The munafiqin, because they acted in secrecy and because they knew all the developments and plans of the Muslims from within presented a greater threat to the community than the outright hostility of the kuffar.

From this time onwards. Hudhayfah was called "The Keeper of the Secret of the Messenger of Allah". Throughout his life he remained faithful to his pledge not to disclose the names of the hypocrites. After the death of the Prophet, the Khalifah often came to him to seek his advice concerning their movements and activities but he remained tight-lipped and cautious.

Umar was only able to find out indirectly who the hypocrites were. If anyone among the Muslims died, Umar would ask:

"Has Hudhayfah attended his funeral prayer?"

If the reply was 'yes', he would perform the prayer. If the reply was 'no', he became doubtful about the person and refrained from performing the funeral prayer for him.

Once Umar asked Hudhayfah: "Is any of my governors a munafiq?" "One," replied Hudhayfah. "Point him out to me," ordered Umar. "That I shall not do," insisted Hudhayfah who later said that shortly after their conversation Umar dismissed the person just as if he had been guided to him.

Hudhayfah's special qualities were made use of by the Prophet, peace be on him, at various times. One of the most testing of such occasions, which required the use of Hudhayfah's intelligence and his presence of mind, was during the Battle of the Ditch. The Muslims on that occasion were surrounded by enemies. The seige they had been placed under had dragged on. The Muslims were undergoing severe hardship and difficulties. They had expended practically all their effort and were utterly exhausted. So intense was the strain that some even began to despair.

The Quraysh and their allies, meanwhile, were not much better off. Their strength and determination had been sapped. A violent wind overturned their tents, extinguished their fires and pelted their faces and eyes with gusts of sand and dust.

In such decisive moments in the history of warfare, the side that loses is the one that despairs first and the one that wins is the one that holds out longer. The role of army intelligence in such situations often proves to be a crucial factor in determining the outcome of the battle.

At this stage of the confrontation the Prophet, peace be on him, felt he could use the special talents and experience of Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman. He decided to send Hudhayfah into the midst of the enemy's positions under cover of darkness to bring him the latest information on their situation and morale before he decided on his next move.

Let us now leave Hudhayfah to relate what happened on this mission fraught with danger and even death.

"That night, we were all seated in rows. Abu Sufyan and his men - the mushrikun of Makkah - were in front of us. The Jewish tribe of Banu Qurayzah were at our rear and we were afraid of them because of our wives and children. The night was stygian dark. Never before was there a darker night nor a wind so strong. So dark was the night that no one could see his fingers and the blast of the wind was like the peel of thunder.

"The hypocrites began to ask the Prophet for permission to leave, saying, 'Our houses are exposed to the enemy.' Anyone who asked the Prophet's permission to leave was allowed to go. Many thus sneaked away until we were left with about three hundred men.

"The Prophet then began a round of inspection passing us one by one until he reached me. I had nothing to protect me from the cold except a blanket belonging to my wife which scarcely reached my knees. He came nearer to

me as I lay crouching on the ground and asked: 'Who is this?' 'Hudhayfah,' replied. 'Hudhayfah?' he queried as I huddled myself closer to the ground too afraid to stand up because of the intense hunger and cold. 'Yes, O Messenger of God,' I replied. 'Something is happening among the people (meaning the forces of Abu Sufyan). Infiltrate their encampment and bring me news of what's happening,' instructed the Prophet.

"I set out. At that moment I was the most terrified person of all and felt terribly cold. The Prophet, peace be on him, prayed: 'O Lord, protect him from in front and from behind, from his right and from his left, from above and from below.'

"By God, no sooner had the Prophet, peace be on him, completed his supplication than God removed from my stomach all traces of fear and from my body all the punishing cold. As I turned to go, the Prophet called me back to him and said: 'Hudhayfah, on no account do anything among the people (of the opposing forces) until you come back to me.'

'Yes,' I replied.

"I went on, inching my way under cover of darkness until I penetrated deep into the mushrikin camp and

became just like one of them. Shortly afterwards, Abu Sufyan got up and began to address his men:

'O people of the Quraysh, I am about to make a statement to you which I fear would reach Muhammad. Therefore, let every man among you look and make sure who is sitting next to him...'

"On hearing this, I immediately grasped the hand of the man next to me and asked, 'Who are you?' (thus putting him on the defensive and clearing myself). "Abu Sufyan went on:

'O people of the Quraysh, by God, you are not in a safe and secure place. Our horses and camels have perished. The Banu Qurayzah have deserted us and we have had unpleasant news about them. We are buffeted by this bitterly cold wind. Our fires do not light and our uprooted tents offer no protection. So get moving. For myself, I am leaving.'

"He went to his camel, untethered and mounted it. He struck it and it stood upright. If the Messenger of God, peace be on him, had not instructed me to do nothing until I returned to him, I would have killed Abu Sufyan then and there with an arrow.

"I returned to the Prophet and found him standing on a blanket performing Salat. When he recognized me, he drew me close to his legs and threw one end of the blanket over me. I informed him of what had happened. He was extremely happy and joyful and gave thanks and praise to

Hudhayfah lived in constant dread of evil and corrupting influences. He felt that goodness and the sources of good in this life were easy to recognize for those who desired good. But it was evil that was deceptive and often difficult to perceive and combat.

He became something of a great moral philosopher. He always warned people to struggle against evil with all their faculties, with their heart, hands and tongue. Those who stood against evil only with their hearts and tongues, and not with their hands, he considered as having abandoned a part of truth. Those who hated evil only in their hearts but did not combat it with their tongues and hands forsook two parts of truth and those who neither detested nor confronted evil with their hearts, tongues or hands he considered as physically alive but morally dead.

Speaking about 'hearts' and their relationship to guidance and error, he once said: "There are four kinds of hearts. The heart that is encased or atrophied. That is the heart of the kafir or ungrateful disbeliever. The heart that is shaped into thin layers. That is the heart of the munafiq or hypocrite. The heart that is open and bare and on which shines a radiant light. That is the heart of the mumin or the believer.

Finally there is the heart in which there is both hypocrisy and faith. Faith is like a tree which thrives with good water and hypocrisy is like an abscess which thrives on pus and blood. Whichever flourishes more, be it the tree of faith or the abscess of hypocrisy, wins control of the heart."

Hudhayfah's experience with hypocrisy and his efforts to combat it gave a touch of sharpness and severity to his tongue. He himself realized this and admitted it with a noble courage: "I went to the Prophet, peace be on him and said: 'O Messenger of God, I have a tongue which is sharp and cutting against my family and I fear that this would lead me to hell-fire.' And the Prophet, peace be upon him, said to me: 'Where do you stand with regard to istighfar - asking forgiveness from Allah? I ask Allah for forgiveness a hundred times during the day. "

A pensive man like Hudhayfah, one devoted to thought, knowledge and reflection may not have been expected to perform feats of heroism in battlefields. Yet Hudhayfah was to prove himself one of the foremost Muslim military commanders in the expansion of Islam into Iraq. He distinguished himself at Hamadan, ar-Rayy, ad-Daynawar, and at the famous Battle of Nihawand.

For the encounter at Nihawand against the Persian forces, Hudhayfah was placed second in command by Umar over the entire Muslim forces which numbered some thirty thousand. The Persian forces

outnumbered them by five to one being some one hundred and fifty thousand strong. The first commander of the Muslim army, an-Numan ibn Maqran, fell early in the battle. The second in command, Hudhayfah, immediately took charge of the situation, giving instructions that the death of the commander should not be broadcast. Under Hudhayfah's daring and inspiring leadership, the Muslims won a decisive victory despite tremendous odds.

Hudhayfah was made governor of important places like Kufa and Ctesiphon (al-Madain). When the news of his appointment as governor of Ctesiphon reached its inhabitants, crowds went out to meet and greet this famous companion of the Prophet of whose piety and righteousness they had heard so much. His great role in the conquests of Persia was already a legend.

As the welcoming party waited, a lean, somewhat scrawny man with dangling feet astride a donkey approached. In his hand he held a loaf of bread and some salt and he ate as he went along. When the rider was already in their midst they realized that he was Hudhayfah, the governor for whom they were waiting. They could not contain their surprise. What manner of man was this! They could however be excused for not recognizing him for they were used to the style, the pomp and the grandeur of Persian rulers.

Hudhayfah carried on and people crowded around him. He saw they were expecting him to speak and he cast a searching look at their faces. Eventually, he said: "Beware of places of fitnah and intrigue." "And what," they asked, "are places of intrigue?" He replied: "The doors of rulers where some people go and try to make the ruler or governor believe lies and praise him for (qualities) he does not possess."

With these words, the people were prepared for what to expect from their new governor. They knew at once that there was nothing in the world that he despised more than hypocrisy.

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