



Ḥayā: More Than Just Modesty in Islam

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Introduction

All praise be to Allah, and may His finest peace and blessings be upon His final prophet, Muhammad ﷺ, who said, “I have not been sent except to perfect noble character.”¹ From this, we see that cultivating good character and moral excellence towards God and His creation is the primary objective of Islam. But in order to effectively develop this in people, Islam centralizes certain moral qualities that serve a foundational role upon which all other virtues can be built. From amongst these qualities is *ḥayā*’ (healthy shame), which the Prophet ﷺ deemed the very hallmark of Islam: “Every religion has its signature character trait, and the signature character trait of Islam is *ḥayā*’.”² This paper will primarily summarize a published study³ by Dr. Muhammad Ismail al-Muqaddim (an Islamic scholar and clinical psychiatrist) on *ḥayā*’, its value, and the domains in which it operates in our lives.

What is *ḥayā*’?

Ḥayā’ carries the meanings of conscientiousness, shame, modesty, bashfulness, and all related feelings that deter a person from behaving indecently. It is derived from the word *ḥayāh* (life) because Arabs considered people’s “being alive” directly proportionate to their experiencing *ḥayā*’. To them, a person devoid of the *ḥayā*’ that prevents them from violating their own moral code is less of a living human being, and more akin to a wild beast whose lower appetites drive it to unprincipled behavior. This is why, in pre-Islamic Arabia, their poetry often praised *ḥayā*’ and courage in tandem; a warrior was expected to embrace a dignified death over the dishonor of fleeing the battlefield in order to survive. Shamelessness was a greater tragedy to them than the loss of life. They also held

¹ Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2001), no. 8952; authenticated by al-Albānī.

² Muḥammad b. Yazīd al-Qazwīnī Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah* (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabīyah, 2011), no. 4181; authenticated by al-Albānī.

³ Muhammad Ismail al-Muqaddim, *Fiqh al-Haya’: Understanding the Islamic Concept of Modesty* (IIPH, 2015). His references are in the book itself; only the Qur’an and hadith citations are footnoted in this paper.

that those without *ḥayā*’ are not truly alive in light of their numb conscience; they appear divorced from the pangs of guilt - an obvious characteristic of the deceased.

The word *shame* immediately conjures a variety of negative connotations and this is no accident. The proliferation of individualism in the modern era has stripped concepts like shame from nearly all of their positive connotations. However, psychologists continue to emphasize the potency and indispensability of [healthy shame](#), as opposed to its unhealthy counterpart which can be paralyzing and destructive to our well-being. They illustrate how shame can serve as an internal alarm that helps us feel accountable for our wrongs while an opportunity remains to correct them. It catches our attention before we plow forward in irreversible ways. According to psychotherapist Dr. John Amodeo, people with an unhealthy repression of shame are more likely to experience personality disorders and unsuccessful relationships, since they will usually project blame on others and accept little themselves. The cruelty of sociopaths and the manipulation of pathological liars are both founded on their lack of shame; they are not “inconvenienced” by any guilt associated with their behavior.

The positive aspects of healthy shame were captured by the early scholars of Islam. Ibn al-Qayyim, for instance, writes:

Ḥayā’ is of the most superior qualities, of the greatest in status, and of the most beneficial. Indeed, it is quintessential to humanness, for whoever carries no *ḥayā*’ has no share of humanness other than flesh, blood, and outward appearance. Likewise, there is no potential for good in a person [without it]. Were it not for this quality, he would never be hospitable to a guest, keep a promise, fulfill a trust, take care of anyone’s needs, prefer what is pleasant, avoid the obscene, cover his private parts, or abstain from fornication. Were it not for *ḥayā*’, many people would not have fulfilled any of their obligations, nor acknowledged the rights of any being, nor kept the ties of kin, nor even shown kindness to parents. The driving element in these acts is either religious, namely hoping for its good outcome [ultimately], or it is worldly, which is the *ḥayā*’ of its doer from the [eyes of] creation.

Therefore, were it not for *ḥayā*’ from either the Creator or the creation, one would not have engaged in these acts.

The peculiarity of our age aside, the positive potential of shame is something universally appreciated across most civilizations. This paper, however, is intended to explore *ḥayā*’ in Islamic ethics in particular, to revisit its lofty status in Islam’s sacred texts, and to identify its praiseworthy manifestations in day-to-day life.

Instinctual *ḥayā*’

According to the Qur’an, once Ādam and Ḥawwā’ عليهما السلام ate from the forbidden tree, they rushed to cover their bodies with leaves, as they suddenly became aware and ashamed of their nakedness for the very first time.⁴ One may call this the birth of instinctual *ḥayā*’, or the inborn faculty in Ādam’s progeny to feel uneasy about their nakedness,⁵ and whatever else they consider disgraceful or unbefitting. Islam then called people to enhance this *ḥayā*’ through faith, whereby they nurture their spirituality to become better acquainted with God, more cognizant of His nearness, more observant of His blessings, and more vigilant of His wrath. But in essence, *ḥayā*’ is an innate quality.

Al-Munāwī says, “*Ḥayā*’ consists of two types. There is the natural type which is created within every soul, like that which is triggered by a private part becoming uncovered or having sexual relations in public. Then there is the faith-based type, which is what prevents a Muslim from committing the forbidden out of fear of Allah.” Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣri (d. 859) defines the latter as “finding an intimidation and sadness in the heart due to the acts you have done before your Lord.” Therefore, nurtured *ḥayā*’ has both preventive and redemptive functions in relation to righteousness, while natural *ḥayā*’, at its core, exists in the *fiṭrah* - the innate nature of every human being, irrespective of religion.

⁴ “And so they ate from it; whereupon their bodies became visible to them, and they started covering themselves with the leaves of the Garden. Thus Adam disobeyed his Lord, and fell.” Qur’an 20:121.

⁵ “O Children of Adam! Do not let Satan seduce you, as he drove your parents out of the Garden, stripping them of their garments, to show them their nakedness. He sees you, him and his clan, from where you cannot see them. We have made the devils friends of those who do not believe.” Qur’an 7:27.

However, just as this heightened faith-based *ḥayā*’ can grow to become as natural as the inborn *ḥayā*’, people can also become deconditioned by society to find all notions of *ḥayā*’ foreign and oppressive. For this reason, Islam did not come with a system that assumed that the original *ḥayā*’ remains intact; rather it recognizes that *ḥayā*’ can be reinstated and/or rehabilitated when it has been compromised.

The ten shades of *ḥayā*’

In *Madārij al-Sālikīn*, Ibn al-Qayyim subdivided *ḥayā*’ into ten categories:

- 1) The ***ḥayā*’ of guilt**; this is like the *ḥayā*’ of Ādam عليه السلام when he fled in Paradise after committing a sin. It is reported that Allah said to him, “Are you fleeing from Me, O Ādam?” He said, “No, my Lord! Rather, out of *ḥayā*’ from You.”
- 2) The ***ḥayā*’ of inaptitude**; this is like the *ḥayā*’ of the angels who tirelessly glorify Allah by night and day. Then, once the Day of Resurrection begins, they say, “Glorified You are! We have not worshiped You as You deserve to be worshiped.”
- 3) The ***ḥayā*’ of awe**; this is the *ḥayā*’ of being deeply acquainted with the greatness of Allah. This *ḥayā*’ intensifies in proportion to the slave’s knowledge of their Lord.
- 4) The ***ḥayā*’ of generosity**; this is like the *ḥayā*’ of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم from those he invited to Zaynab’s wedding dinner. They overstayed their welcome, but he صلى الله عليه وسلم was too shy to tell them, so he simply stood and left.
- 5) The ***ḥayā*’ of chastity**; this is like the *ḥayā*’ of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib رضي الله عنه which prevented him from asking the Messenger of Allah صلى الله عليه وسلم about washing away pre-seminal fluid, as he was married to his daughter.
- 6) The ***ḥayā*’ of humility**; this is like the *ḥayā*’ of the slave from his Lord, the Mighty and Majestic, when he asks Him for his needs. This may stem from the asker belittling himself and realizing the enormity of his sins, or from grasping the greatness of the One being asked.

- 7) The ***ḥayā*’ of love**; this is the *ḥayā*’ of the lover of his beloved. It is so powerful that whenever his beloved, who is absent, simply comes to mind, an unexplainable *ḥayā*’ may flare in his heart and heat his face. Most people do not realize why they tremble and become bashful upon suddenly seeing their beloved. This is caused by the heart sensing the beloved’s authority over it, and hence that thrill and fear overtakes it.
- 8) The ***ḥayā*’ of servitude**; this *ḥayā*’ is necessitated by a blend of love, fear, and recognizing that a person must serve Allah, but can never do so adequately due to His incomprehensible grandeur.
- 9) The ***ḥayā*’ of dignity**; this is the *ḥayā*’ of a noble soul when it feels that it acted towards others in a way that is beneath its standards of dignity, be it in sacrifice, generosity, or kindness.
- 10) The ***ḥayā*’ from oneself**; this is the *ḥayā*’ of a noble soul when it detects its own deficiency or that it has settled for less. It is almost as if one has two souls, one ashamed of the other. This is the most complete *ḥayā*’, for if people were to be ashamed of themselves, then by greater virtue, they would become ashamed in front of others.

***Ḥayā*’ in Islam**

Islam calls us to revive our internal compass and protect our sense of self-respect by accentuating our *ḥayā*’ and amplifying it with *taqwá* (God consciousness). It validates the fear of feeling inadequate as an incentive that can begin us on the journey to piety. From there, one’s veneration and love for God are cultivated to immunize a person from all that could jeopardize their standing with Him. *Ḥayā*’ therefore constitutes the first layer of moral insulation - that which protects us against the elements of indecency around us. *Taqwá* is the second layer, an earned upgrade in *ḥayā*’ which further reinforces it for the believer. With regards to Allah’s words, “The garment of *taqwá*—that is best,” Sufyān b. ‘Uyaynah said, “*Ḥayā*’ is the most elementary form of *taqwá*, and the servant does not fear [Allah]

until he first experiences shame. How else did the pious reach piety except through *ḥayā*’?”

The Qur’an esteems *ḥayā*’ and those who possess it. For instance, Allah captures for us in the Qur’an how Mūsá عليه السلام assisted the disadvantaged women at the well of Madyan, and then immediately “walked away to the shade” (al-Qaṣaṣ 28: 24) without socializing with them or requesting payment for his service. Such behaviors were prevented by his *ḥayā*’, for the first is contrary to propriety and the second to chivalry. A few verses later, Allah says, “One of the two women then came to him walking with *ḥayā*’. She said, ‘My father invites you to reward you for having watered [our animals] for us.’” (al-Qaṣaṣ 28: 25) Many scholars of *tafsīr* (exegesis) explain that this verse was clearly structured to celebrate this woman’s multifaceted *ḥayā*’. To explain, based on a reciter’s choice of where to pause in this verse and from where to resume, the term *ḥayā*’ could be describing her stride (walking with *ḥayā*’) or her voice (speaking with *ḥayā*’). Furthermore, she made sure to establish that she was not inviting him herself but rather only as an envoy of her father, whose old age prevented him from extending the invitation himself.

Ḥayā’ is so valued in the Sunnah that exceptions were made in some of its firmest laws out of consideration for it. Marital officiation, for instance, is treated with the utmost sensitivity in Islam. Due to there being no room for ambiguity in such a consequential agreement, jurists agree that only an immediate, explicit, verbal declaration of mutual approval is acceptable for a valid marriage to take effect. Yet, a concession was afforded to women whose *ḥayā*’ overwhelms them due to not having expressed interest in a man before this. ‘Ā’ishah رضي الله عنها, narrates that when the Messenger of Allah صلى الله عليه وسلم instructed families to consult women before marrying them off, she said to him, “She (the virgin) would be too shy to speak.” He صلى الله عليه وسلم said, “Then, her consent is her silence.”⁶ Elsewhere, the Prophet’s Sunnah authorized *ḥayā*’ as a legitimate gauge by which a believer with a sound heart can discern between vice and virtue. He صلى الله عليه وسلم told al-Nuwās b. Sam‘ān رضي الله عنه,

⁶ Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-musnad al-ṣaḥīḥ* (Beirut: Dār Ṭawq al-Najāh, 2001), no. 6971; Muslim b. Ḥajjāj al-Naysābūrī, *al-Musnad al-ṣaḥīḥ* (Beirut: Dār Ihyā’ at-Turāth al-‘Arabi), no. 1420.

“Righteousness is good manners, and sin is that which discomfits your chest and that which you would hate for people to discover.”⁷

Muslim jurists have also devoted entire chapters to legal regulations designed to ensure that people are not taken advantage of because of their *ḥayā*. They coined maxims such as, “Whatever is taken by the sword of *ḥayā* is unlawful,” which meant that guilt tripping others into forgoing their rights is akin to taking from them by force. Imām Aḥmad applied this to a debtor harassing a creditor to reduce the amount owed, and many applied this to eating people’s food and staying at their homes. If a person knows that they only invited him out of being too timid or embarrassed to do otherwise, it would be prohibited to accept what they offered, and a person would be obligated to return it or repay its value if they had already consumed it. This was not just a man-made measure designed to protect *ḥayā*, but it was derived directly from the Prophet’s ﷺ words, “A Muslim’s property is unlawful [for consumption] unless he *open-heartedly* allows that.”⁸

‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar رضي الله عنهما narrates that the Prophet ﷺ said, “*Ḥayā* and faith have been paired together whereby if one is removed, the other is removed as well.”⁹ Hadith like this one—they are many—mean that *ḥayā* is inseparable from Islam, and a fundamental driver behind being committed to living the faith. This is also what ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz must have intended, when he heard people saying, “*Ḥayā* is part of the religion,” and he responded, “Rather, it is the entire religion.” However, it is important to note that they did not mean that the inborn *ḥayā* which even non-Muslims have qualifies them as believers eligible for salvation, but rather refer to a complete *ḥayā*.

Abū Hurayrah رضي الله عنه narrates that the Prophet ﷺ said, “*Ḥayā* is from faith, and faith is in Paradise. And vulgarity is from callousness, and callousness is in the

⁷ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2553.

⁸ ‘Alī b. ‘Umar al-Dāraquṭnī, *Sunan al-Dāraquṭnī* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2004), nos. 2885 and 2886; authenticated by al-Albānī.

⁹ Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥākim, *al-Mustadrak ‘alā al-ṣaḥīḥayn* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyah, 1990), no. 58; authenticated by al-Ḥākim according to the criteria of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, and al-Dhahabī concurred.

Hellfire.”¹⁰ Hence, the faithful are those who are cautious of using vulgar expressions (*badhā’ah*), even when factually correct, while those with callous hearts (*jafā’*) do not abstain from obscene speech. For this reason, we find that the Prophet ﷺ also said, “*Ḥayā*’ and silence are two branches of faith, and vulgarity and eloquence are two branches of hypocrisy.”¹¹ Considering the Prophet ﷺ was the most eloquent speaker, and praised others for being articulate, it was clear to his audience that, in this context, he intended to mean that sometimes it is the strength of faith that disables one’s tongue from speaking insolently and one’s diseased heart that enables one to string together lies and lewdness.

The earliest Muslims understood that their survival in the hereafter required maintaining a healthy heart that believes in the unseen and despises the obscene. Al-Fuḍayl b. ‘Iyāḍ would say, “Five signs of doom are hardness of the heart, dryness of the eyes, lack of *ḥayā*’, inclination to this world, and indulgence in false hope.” Mālik b. Dīnār would say, “Allah (the Glorified and Exalted) never punished a heart with anything more severe than plucking *ḥayā*’ from it.”

***Ḥayā*’ is a quality of Allah**

The greatest virtue of *ḥayā*’ is it being an inherent attribute of the Divine Himself. Several hadith(s) establish that Allah (the Mighty and Majestic) is *ḥayī*, meaning He is abundant in *ḥayā*’ and it is His ever-present characteristic. Salmān رضي الله عنه narrates that the Prophet ﷺ said, “Allah is indeed *ḥayī* and generous; when a person raises their hands to Him [in supplication], He is too shy to send them back empty and disappointed.”¹²

Of course, Allah’s qualities exist perfectly in Him, unlike their counterparts in created beings. Al-Mubārakfūrī explains that “ascribing *ḥayā*’ to Allah (the Most High) is understood in a fashion befitting of Him, just like the rest of His attributes which we must believe in without delving into the details of how they relate [to

¹⁰ Muḥammad b. ‘Īsā al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī* (Egypt: Maṭba‘at Mustafā al-Ḥalabī, 1975), no. 2009; graded *ḥasan-ṣaḥīḥ* by al-Tirmidhī, and authenticated by al-Albānī.

¹¹ *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2027; authenticated by al-Albānī.

¹² *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 3556; authenticated by al-Albānī.

Allah].” Such is the framework set by the Qur’an: “There is nothing similar to Him, and He is the All-Hearing, All-Seeing” (al-Shūrā 42:11). Ibn al-Qayyim says, “As for the *ḥayā*’ of the Lord (the Exalted) of His slave, this is a different type. Understandings cannot fathom it, nor can intelligence encompass it. It is a *ḥayā*’ of nobility, kindness, generosity, and glory. He (the Blessed and Exalted) is *ḥayī* and generous - too shy to return His slave’s hands empty after he had raised them to Him, and too shy to punish the elderly whose hair has grown white in Islam.”

Ya‘lá b. Umayyah رضى الله عنه narrates that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “Allah is indeed *ḥayī* and *sittīr*; He loves *ḥayā*’ and *sitr*. Hence, when one of you bathes, he must conceal himself.”¹³ *Sittīr* is a superlative of *sitr* (concealment), meaning Allah treasures concealment, hates that people’s bodies be exposed unnecessarily, and loves those who observe *ḥayā*’ and *sitr* from others. The only exception made by the Prophet ﷺ was for lawful partners, perhaps due to the visual elements enhancing their physical gratification. In fact, when he ﷺ was asked in that same context, “What about a man sitting naked while all alone?,” he said, “Allah is more deserving [than anyone] that *ḥayā*’ be exhibited in front of Him.”¹⁴ All degrees of nakedness, such as revealing any body part or its shape, in a context prohibited by the Shariah—for men or women—would be contrary to *ḥayā*’ and *sitr* which are so dear to Allah that they are among of His qualities.

Allah’s love for *ḥayā*’ and *sitr* even extends to our sins. He hates that a person exposes himself, and loves to veil people from public disgrace. This may be unexpected, especially when Allah benefits nothing from this whatsoever, but His sublime nobility necessitates concealing us from being humiliated in the eyes of others or being immediately punished by Him. Yaḥyá b. Mu‘ādh said, “Exalted is the One whose slave sins, and yet He is the One who becomes shy.” He would also say, “Whoever has *ḥayā*’ with Allah when obeying Him, Allah has *ḥayā*’ with him when he sins.” Ibn al-Qayyim explains this:

¹³ Aḥmad b. Shu‘ayb al-Nasā’ī, *Sunan al-Nasā’ī* (Aleppo: Maktabat al-Maṭbū‘āt al-Islāmiyyah, 1986), no. 406; authenticated by al-Albānī.

¹⁴ *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2769; graded *ḥasan* (acceptable) by al-Albānī.

Whoever exhibits *ḥayā*, even during acts of obedience, wherein his heart is cast between his Lord's hands in shame and intimidation... Were such a person to fall into sin, Allah (the Glorified and Exalted) is shy to look at him in this state, due to his significance in Allah's eyes. He has *ḥayā* to see His cherished slave, who is valuable to Him, in such a foul state... In everyday life, we see this. Were a man to come across someone very dear, beloved, and near to him—perhaps a child, companion, or another loved one—while they are betraying him, this discovery brings about a strange feeling of *ḥayā*, as if he were the criminal, and this is the peak of nobility.

As for those who do not have *ḥayā* and therefore continue to disobey Allah, Allah does not have *ḥayā* in punishing them in this world and the next. These are people for whom the gates of redemption are blocked, or shut entirely, and they will have to pay for their crimes despite Allah's vast mercy. The Prophet ﷺ said, "My entire nation is pardoned except for those who publicize [their sins]. And a form of publicizing is when a person commits [a sin] at night, then he says in the morning despite Allah having concealed it, 'O so-and-so, I did such and such last night.' He spent his night being concealed by Allah, and then tore Allah's cover off himself in the morning."¹⁵

***Ḥayā* is the hallmark of the prophets**

Ḥayā is the legacy of all the prophets. It has been protected by Allah from going extinct, despite the many distortions and abrogations their messages faced. Abū Mas'ūd al-Badrī رضي الله عنه narrates that the Prophet ﷺ said about this, "Indeed, of what people have retained from the words of the first prophethood is: if you feel no *ḥayā*, then do as you wish."¹⁶ God's prophets not only taught this virtue consistently throughout the generations, but they were also the best of those who embodied it from among God's creation.

In one hadith, the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, "Mūsá was a man of intense *ḥayā*. He was always keen to cover himself, and his shyness did not allow for

¹⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5721, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2990.

¹⁶ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 3483.

anything to be visible from his body. A group of people from the Israelites harassed him, saying, ‘You do not cover up this way except due to some [skin] defect or scrotal hernia.’ Allah wished to clear his name, so on a day when he went off to bathe in seclusion and placed his clothes on a stone, the stone ran off with his clothing. Mūsā chased after it, calling out, “O stone, my clothes! O stone, my clothes!” Ultimately, he arrived at a place where the Israelites were gathered, and they saw him naked, having the best of forms that Allah had created. They said, ‘By Allah, there is no defect in Mūsā whatsoever.’ He grabbed his clothes, and began beating the stone. And by Allah, he left six or seven marks on the stone from his strikes.”¹⁷

In a famous hadith, we learn that the creation will desperately seek relief from the distress of the Last Day, rushing to each of the prophets to intercede for them before Allah so that the judgment may begin. They will approach Ādam, then Nūḥ, then Ibrāhīm, then ‘Īsā عليه السلام and each of these mighty messengers will decline and feel unfit for this daunting task. But with Ādam, Nūḥ, and Ibrāhīm in particular, the hadith establishes that it was their feeling of *ḥayā*’ with their Lord that will prevent them “due to remembering their sins.”¹⁸

As for our Prophet Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم, Ibn Ḥajar states that he was endowed by God with the purest, innate *ḥayā*’, and his acquired faith-based *ḥayā*’ was of a supreme, unparalleled tier. Abū Sa’īd al-Khudrī رضي الله عنه said, “The Messenger of Allah صلى الله عليه وسلم was more bashful than a virgin in her *khiḍr*, when he would see something he disliked, we would know it from his face.”¹⁹ The *khiḍr* is the innermost corner of a house that is inaccessible to outsiders, where a young girl would find undisturbed privacy when visitors came. The sheltered virgin—as opposed to married women, or women who casually mingle with the public—has an even greater sense of *ḥayā*’ than others. Hence, when the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم would encounter something inappropriate, his profound *ḥayā*’ would not allow him to hide his reaction; it was more obvious on his face than the reaction of a sheltered virgin who was intruded

¹⁷ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 278; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 339.

¹⁸ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 4712; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 194.

¹⁹ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6102.

upon without notice in the most private quarters of her parents' home. At times, it would cause his face to redden, and other times, it rendered him صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم unable to speak. As Abū Dahbal al-Jumāḥī, an Umayyad poet, said in a couplet of praise:

Ḥayā ' kept his words صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم few, as if he were sick,
Though his body had not suffered the slightest prick.

During the extraordinary night journey (*al-Mi'rāj*), the Prophet صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم went back and forth between his Lord and Mūsā عليه السلام, each time seeking another reduction in the number of daily prayers due from his nation. But after it was reduced from fifty prayers to five, and Mūsā عليه السلام still counseled the Prophet Muhammad صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم to seek a further reduction lest the people fail at upholding it, he صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم could not overcome his *ḥayā* ' to do so. He صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم said to Mūsā عليه السلام, "I have asked my Lord until I have become ashamed. Instead, I will accept and submit."²⁰

‘Ā’ishah رضي الله عنها attests that the *ḥayā* ' of the Prophet صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم not only had him transcend vulgarity, but also vengeance: "The Prophet صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم was never vulgar, nor lewd, nor loud and unruly in the markets, nor would he repay evil with evil. Instead, he would forgive and overlook it."²¹

Ḥayā ' among the Companions and early Muslims

The Prophet's Companions were all keen to emulate their perfect role model صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم in his every virtue, and the following are but *some* examples of the lofty states of *ḥayā* ' they inherited and lived by.

It was well-known that Allah distinguished ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān رضي الله عنه in particular with the quality of *ḥayā* '. The Messenger of Allah صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم attested to this himself, saying, "The most genuine of my nation in *ḥayā* ' is ‘Uthmān."²² It was so intense that it elicited the *ḥayā* ' of the people and angels around him. In a long hadith, ‘Ā’ishah رضي الله عنها narrates that she said to the Prophet صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم, "Abū Bakr

²⁰ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 7517; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 162.

²¹ *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2016; authenticated by al-Ḥākim according to the criteria of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, and both al-Dhahabī and al-Albānī concurred.

²² *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 3790; *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, no. 154; authenticated by al-Albānī.

entered, but you did not move nor mind... Then ‘Umar entered, but you did not move nor mind... Then ‘Uthmān entered, so you sat up and fixed your clothes (covering your legs).” In response, he said, “Should I not have ḥayā’ of a man that the angels have ḥayā’ of?”²³ In another narration, “‘Uthmān is a bashful man. Were I to admit him while in this state, I fear that he would not mention his need to us.”²⁴

‘Ā’ishah رضي الله عنها herself was known for her incredible ḥayā’, to the degree that she would be uncomfortable removing her hijab in the presence of the deceased. She says, “I used to enter the room without my veil where the Messenger of Allah صلى الله عليه وسلم and my father رضي الله عنه were buried, and would tell [myself] that it was only my husband and my father. But, by Allah, once ‘Umar رضي الله عنه was buried [there], I never entered it without my garments pulled over me—out of ḥayā’ of ‘Umar رضي الله عنه.”²⁵

Asmā’ bt. Abī Bakr رضي الله عنها mentions that during the early years of her marriage to al-Zubayr, their poverty forced her into hard labor. One day, as she carried a heavy load of date pits on her head for nearly 3 kilometers to feed her husband’s horse, the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم met her en route along with some of his Companions. He صلى الله عليه وسلم offered her a ride on his camel, but she declined to travel with a group of unrelated men. Upon reaching al-Zubayr, she explained to him that he صلى الله عليه وسلم “lowered [his camel] for me to ride, but I felt ḥayā’ and thought of your jealousy.” He responded, “By Allah, you carrying the date pits is certainly more difficult for me to bear than you riding with him.”²⁶

Fāṭimah رضي الله عنها, the daughter of Allah’s Messenger صلى الله عليه وسلم, once complained that she was appalled by the tight-fitted shrouds which are wrapped around a deceased woman, revealing the shape of her body. Umm Ja‘far said: “O daughter of Allah’s Messenger صلى الله عليه وسلم, shall I show you something I saw in Abyssinia?” She called for moist palm-fibers, bent them, then threw a garment over them. Fāṭimah said, “How wonderful and excellent this is!... If I die, you and ‘Ali wash me, and do not allow

²³ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2401.

²⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2402.

²⁵ *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 25660; authenticated by al-Ḥākim, al-Haythami, and al-Albānī.

²⁶ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5224; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2182.

anyone to enter upon me [before dressing me in this].” Her wish was fulfilled at her funeral, and her *ḥayā*’ lives on to guide the believing women until the end of time.

The biographies of our righteous predecessors, the earliest generations of Muslims, are also replete with exemplary *ḥayā*’ with Allah and with the people:

Abū Hudhayl said, “We have met people who would have *ḥayā*’ with Allah, even in the darkness of the night.” Al-Thawrī said, “By that, he meant feeling ashamed that their bodies might become uncovered [while sleeping].”

Muḥammad b. Sīrīn said, “I never once had relations with a woman, not while awake or asleep, except [my wife] Umm ‘Abd Allāh. I would even see a woman in my dream, then realizing that she is not permissible for me, I would avert my gaze.” Some have said, “I wish that I was as intelligent while awake as Ibn Sīrīn was while asleep.”

Mu‘āwiyah b. Aws said, “I saw Hishām b. ‘Ammār. When he would walk, his gaze would be lowered to the ground, and he would never lift his head to the sky out of *ḥayā*’ with Allah, the Mighty and Majestic.”

Al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad b. Khusrū said, “Abū Bakr b. Maymūn once knocked on al-Ḥumaydī’s door. He assumed permission was granted, so he entered to find him with his thigh uncovered. This caused al-Ḥumaydī to weep and say, ‘By Allah, you have looked at a place that no person has ever seen since I reached maturity.’”

Mihrān b. ‘Amr al-Asdi narrates that he witnessed al-Fuḍayl b. ‘Iyāḍ standing at the sacred site on the eve of ‘Arafah, weeping so passionately that he could not even supplicate, and was saying, “Oh my shame! Oh my humiliation! Even if You forgive me!”

Muḥammad b. Abī Ḥātim narrates that Muḥammad b. Salām would say to his attendees, after Imām al-Bukhārī left the gathering, “Have you ever seen a virgin girl that has more *ḥayā*’ than this man?”

Where *ḥayā*’ does not belong

Since the Prophet ﷺ said that “*Ḥayā*’ brings about nothing but good,”²⁷ Muslim scholars were keen to identify that *ḥayā*’ is qualified by its fruits and condemnable when it results in violating God’s laws or seizing the rights of people. As al-Aḥnaf b. Qays once said, “Indeed, *ḥayā*’ has a designated limit; whatever exceeds that, you may as well call it whatever you like.” For instance, a person may refuse to speak up when Islamically necessary, out of shyness, and another may refuse to speak up without knowledge, also out of shyness. At first glance, they both appear to be operating in light of *ḥayā*’, while Islam categorizes the first behavior as weakness and incompetence, and the second as dignity and piety. On this nuance, al-Qurṭubī writes,

The chosen one [(Prophet Muhammad)] ﷺ was certainly committed to *ḥayā*’ himself, and would instruct others with it and encourage it. However, his *ḥayā*’ would never prevent him from speaking the truth, nor fulfilling any religious injunction. This was in adherence to His words (the Most High), “...and Allah does not shy from the truth.” (33:53) That is the epitome of *ḥayā*’ and its most perfect, beautiful, and balanced form.

As for someone who is overwhelmed by *ḥayā*’ such that it deters him from truth, then such an individual has abandoned shyness before the Creator to be shy before the creation. Whoever is like this loses out on the benefits of *ḥayā*’ and becomes characterized with hypocrisy and showing off.

The Islamic tradition is filled with cautionary statements against the two enemies of sacred knowledge: arrogance and embarrassment. These are both insecurities that can be misperceived as *ḥayā*’, or even called *ḥayā*’ in the linguistic sense. However, in actuality, they are contrary to this virtue because of what they hinder and are never a valid excuse to abort the pursuit of learning how to please God. It is fascinating to note that the Prophet ﷺ knew and sensed the *ḥayā*’ he had instilled in the Companions and how he would, at times, preface his more explicit instructions with words that mitigated their roughness. In one hadith, “I am to you

²⁷ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6117; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 37.

but as a father is, teaching you. As you relieve yourselves, do not face the direction of prayer, nor turn your backs to it...”²⁸ This is a Qur’anic methodology; it usually employs suggestive language to avoid offending the *ḥayā*’ of its readers. However, it is not constrained by this principle, since the nature of law sometimes necessitates language that makes people uneasy, in order to assert specific notions that would otherwise be lost in ambiguity.

Leading scholars of the Companions also utilized this wise method. ‘Ā’ishah رضي الله عنها, for instance, was once approached by Abū Mūsā al-Ash‘arī, who said, “O Mother of the Believers, I wish to ask you about something, but I am shy of you.” She said, “Do not be shy to ask me something that you would ask your own mother who gave birth to you, for I am but your mother.” He said, “What makes a ritual bath mandatory?” She said, “You have arrived at the best acquainted person [regarding this]. The Messenger of Allah صلى الله عليه وسلم said, ‘If he sits between her four limbs, and the two points of circumcision meet, then a ritual bath has become mandatory.’”²⁹ She was surely not boasting by labeling herself an expert, but rather commending him for not being prevented by *ḥayā*’ from asking a wife of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم about a private matter like this, especially when the validity of his prayers hinged on it. In another context, ‘Ā’ishah رضي الله عنها said, “So excellent are the Anṣārī women; their *ḥayā*’ does not hinder them from gaining understanding of the religion.”³⁰ It is also reported that ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib رضي الله عنه would say, “Whoever does not know should never be stopped by *ḥayā*’ from asking until he knows, and whoever is asked about something that he does not know should never be stopped by *ḥayā*’ from saying ‘I do not know.’”

Conforming to social pressure is another behavioral flaw that may come disguised as *ḥayā*’, but can actually be a cowardly act. This is why being a voice of reason in the face of widespread dogmatic opinion and a voice of virtue in an environment of prevalent immorality are acts of devotion in Islam. The Qur’an captures for us how all the prophets were fearless reformers who never shied away from challenging

²⁸ *Sunan al-Nasā’ī*, no. 40; deemed *ḥasan-ṣaḥīḥ* by al-Albānī.

²⁹ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 349.

³⁰ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 38.

the unethical status quo with wisdom, and so too were their genuine followers. Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī رضي الله عنه narrates that the Prophet ﷺ said, “No one of you should humiliate himself.” They said, “O Messenger of Allah, how does one of us humiliate himself?” He said, “By seeing a matter that he owes it to Allah to speak up about, and yet he does not speak up. As a result, Allah (the Mighty and Majestic) says to him on the Day of Resurrection, ‘What prevented you from saying such-and-such for My sake?’ He will say, ‘Fear of the people.’ He will say, ‘I was more deserving of being feared by you.’”³¹ Note how the Prophet ﷺ implied here that shyness in this context was shameful, and that defying it would have meant self-respect and avoidance of true humiliation.

This principle (*ḥayā*’ before Allah being paramount) can mend so many people’s relationships with their Lord and with each other. Consider the victim who finds the courage to accuse her rapist, defying her society’s backward victim-shaming culture, to save future victims. Consider the relative who has the audacity to insist that the loan be documented as the Shariah recommends, despite the lack of trust that may suggest, to preserve family bonds in the long term. Consider the employee who is able to bring a colleague to embrace Islam by courageously praying in public or politely refusing to shake hands with the opposite gender. Biographers mention that whenever Shams al-Dīn al-Maqdisī heard anyone backbite—regardless of how notable—he would interrupt him, with a smile, by saying, “*Astaghfirullāh* (I seek God’s forgiveness).”

How to cultivate *ḥayā*’

The following “*ḥayā*’ generators” are primary ways to unearth the *ḥayā*’ that may be buried within us, restore its sheen when it rusts, and increase its strength through authentic faith.

1. Reflect on how *ḥayā*’ offers the love of God. All people seek to connect with their Creator, and long from their depths for reassurance that He is pleased with them. This is what Islam came to offer humanity: an opportunity to discover God

³¹ *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, no. 4008; authenticated by al-Arnāʾūṭ.

and enjoy the bliss of being a reflection of His light as best as a created being can. Ibn al-Qayyim said, “Whoever aligns with Allah in one of His attributes, it leads him to Allah with its reins, brings him to his Lord, brings him near to His mercy, and makes him beloved to Allah. He (the Exalted) is the Most Merciful and loves the merciful, is the Generous One and loves the generous, is the All-Knowing and loves the knowledgeable, is the Strong One and loves the strong believer more than He loves the weak believer, is *Ḥayī* and loves *ḥayā*’, the Beautiful and loves the people of beauty, and is *witr* (uniquely one) and loves the people of *witr* [prayer].”

2. Practice *ḥayā*’ to experience it. The inborn *ḥayā*’ that dwells dormant in some people must first be revived through practice before it can be felt by our psycho-spiritual sensors. Acting contrary to *ḥayā*’, along with recurrent exposure to those devoid of it, is what desensitized us to it in the first place. Therefore, awaiting the feeling of healthy shame to return on its own accord, as opposed to reconditioning ourselves upon it, is flawed thinking. Lowering our gaze in a world saturated with shameless images and donning the hijab as defined by Islam, not fashion trends, are two of many pathways to resuscitate our sensitivity to *ḥayā*’. Just as we are told in the Qur’an that humanity’s parents felt shame and hastened to cover up, we are told that the devil’s target was to sedate their *ḥayā*’ and make them comfortable with being unclothed. Allah says, “O children of Ādam, let not Satan tempt you as he removed your parents from Paradise, stripping them of their clothing to show them their private parts” (al-A‘rāf 7:27). Therefore, we must normalize the dictates of *ḥayā*’ in our conduct, before we can expect to experience *ḥayā*’ in our hearts.

3. Reverential fear through sacred knowledge. The pinnacle of *ḥayā*’ is to be more watchful of Allah’s gaze than that of people, just as Islam’s pinnacle (i.e., *iḥsān*) is to “worship Allah as though you see Him, and if you cannot see Him, then know that He sees you.”³² This station is reached by reflecting on the omniscient nature of the Divine, *al-Raqīb* (the Observer), *al-Shahīd* (the Witness), *al-Samī‘* (the All-Hearing), *al-Baṣīr* (the All-Seeing), *al-Muḥīṭ* (the

³² *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 50; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 8.

All-Encompassing). Ḥātim al-Aṣamm said, “If a spy were sitting by you, you would be on guard from him, yet your words are displayed before Allah and you are not on guard?” Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما said, “O sinner who feels secure of awful consequences, be sure that what follows a sin is greater than the sin you commit. Your lack of *ḥayā*’ from those [angels] on your right and left as you sin is greater than the sin you commit. Your laughter, despite not knowing what Allah will do with you, is greater than the sin. Your sadness when you missed the opportunity to sin, is greater than the sin, had you committed it. Your fear of the wind when it moves your door’s curtain as you sin, and your heart not shuddering from Allah’s gaze upon you, is greater than the sin, had you committed it.” Imām Aḥmad once heard Abu Ḥāmid al-Khalqānī recite these two couplets of poetry:

When my Lord says to me,
Had you no shame to disobey Me?
You hide the sins from My creation,
And with those sins you come to Me?

...At once, he instructed al-Khalqānī to repeat them to him, and he did. Having learned them, the Imām headed to his home, repeating them time and again as he wept, imagining himself on the receiving end of that chastisement. Once a person realizes that his Lord is looking at him, this certainty yields *ḥayā*’ before Allah, which drives him to bear the burdens of obedience. It is similar to the one who joyfully serves his beloved; you find him energetic in his work and enduring its encumbrances, especially if his beloved is kind and benevolent towards him. In that vein, the gaze of Allah, the Mighty and Majestic, is never absent from His slaves. But when the slaves become heedless of their Master looking at them, this gives rise to disrespectful behavior and a lack of *ḥayā*’ within them.

4. Recalling Allah’s immense favors. *Ḥayā*’ also arises from noticing the gracious treatment one endlessly enjoys from Allah. Just as dignified people cannot bear to be inconsiderate with those who are kind and courteous with them, we should feel healthy shame before our Lord whose blessings are innumerable. Al-Junayd would say, “*Ḥayā*’ is about seeing the favors and realizing one’s shortcomings. From between these two, a condition is born called *ḥayā*’, and its reality is a quality that

drives one to leave indecency, and prevents one from failing to deliver the rights of each being.” It is also reported that Dhun-Nūn al-Miṣri said, “Belonging to Allah are slaves that left sinning out of *ḥayā*’ of His generosity, after having left it out of fear of His punishment. If He said to you, ‘Do what you wish, and I will not hold you responsible for sinning,’ His generosity should increase your *ḥayā*’ of Him, and your abstinence from disobeying Him—if you are truly a noble, free, grateful slave. How then should your *ḥayā*’ be when He has in fact threatened you [with punishment]?” Ibn al-Sammāk said, “He (the Glorified) has tolerated you until it was almost as if He overlooked you. Will you not have *ḥayā*’ from Allah in light of how long you have not had *ḥayā*’?”

5. Spiritual refinement through devotion. Feeling near to Allah and feeling protective of that honored rank are states that are cultivated by pure ritual devotion and sincere acts of service. When done diligently and regularly, they feed a person’s faith and *ḥayā*’, becoming powerful deterrents against indecent behavior. For example, Allah says about the prayer, “Indeed, the prayer prohibits immorality and wrongdoing.” (al-‘Ankabūt: 29: 45) It was once said to the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, “So-and-so prays the entire night, then when the morning arrives, he steals!” He ﷺ said, “His prayer will [eventually] restrain him.”³³

6. Hover around *ḥayā*’. Socialization is the most influential force in most people’s lives, and this can be a huge resource in nurturing *ḥayā*’ in our personalities. In addition to reflecting on the virtues of *ḥayā*’ and the dangers of disregarding it, immersing oneself in the biographies of the earliest generations of Islam is of paramount importance when striving to soak up this quality. This should also be supplemented with good company, to visually absorb how careful the pious are in their glances, how humble they are in their words, and how their self-respect makes them incapable of settling for the standards of others over those of Allah. Mujāhid b. Jabr used to say, “If a Muslim does not benefit anything from his brother except that his *ḥayā*’ with him keeps him from sinning, that is sufficient.”

³³ *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 9776; authenticated by Ibn Ḥibbān and al-Wādi‘ī.

7. Treasure honesty. Many people are unfazed when lying to a child, due to considering the child (and the “fib”) to be trivial, but may find it difficult to lie to an elder, due to the reverence their seniority brings. Similarly, it is only people who hold themselves in high regard that *shy* away from dishonesty, be it with Allah, or with the people, or with themselves. For this reason, scholars advise people seeking redemption from a sinful life to begin with honesty, as that will reinstate in them a sense of self-worth, and thereby erect the fence of *ḥayā*’ between them and their dark past. Perhaps this is among the reasons why the Prophet ﷺ said, “Adhere to truthfulness, for truthfulness certainly leads to righteousness, and righteousness certainly leads to Paradise. And a person will be truthful, and insist on remaining truthful, until he is written with Allah as a *ṣiddīq* (strong confirmer of the truth).”³⁴

Conclusion

More than just modesty, *ḥayā*’ is the defining characteristic of Islam and constitutes the first layer of our moral insulation, protecting us from the indecency that so commonly prevails around us. Dedicating time to its cultivation is therefore vital in our journey to Allah.

We ask Allah to forgive us for whatever misplaced statements or intentions this paper may contain, for any statements that don’t match our actions, and for all we have showcased of knowledge regarding *ḥayā*’ while being negligent in practicing it. May He make us act on our knowledge, seeking His Face, and not hold our shortcomings against us. Indeed, He is Most Gracious, Most Generous.

³⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6094.