

‘Āshūrā’

‘Āshūrā’, Muslim holy day observed on the 10th of Muḥarram, the first month of the Muslim calendar (Gregorian date variable). The term is derived from the Arabic word for the number ten. The word Muḥarram itself derives from the Arabic root *ḥ-r-m*, one of whose meanings is “forbidden” (*ḥarām*). Traditionally, Muḥarram was one of the four sacred months when fighting was not allowed.

Fasting on ‘Āshūrā’ was the norm in early Islamic society, and the Prophet Muhammad himself fasted on this day. Later in his life, however, Muhammad received a revelation that caused him to make adjustments in the Islamic calendar. With these, Ramadan, the ninth month, became the month of fasting, and the obligation to fast on ‘Āshūrā’ was dropped.

Among Sunnis, ‘Āshūrā’ is commemorated as the day that Allah parted the Red Sea for Moses (Mūsā) and his followers to escape from the pharaoh.

For the Shi‘ah, the 10th of Muḥarram is the day on which Al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī, the Prophet’s grandson by his daughter Fāṭimah and his son-in-law ‘Alī, and most of his small band of followers were killed by Umayyad forces in the Battle of Karbala (October 10, 680). Across the Shi‘i world, believers annually commemorate his martyrdom. Preachers deliver sermons, recount the life of Ḥusayn and the history of the battle, and recite poetry commemorating Ḥusayn and his virtues. Passion plays and processions are also staged. Some believers practice self-flagellation.

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Shi‘ah commemorating the martyrdom of Al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī on the holy day known as ‘Āshūrā’.

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