

THE MEANING OF SUCCESS AND FAILURE

from the perspective of Islam, Iman and Ihsan (i.e. living in the Divine Presence)

by Muhammad Harun Riedinger

The Arabic word for success, which also recurs in the Generous Qur'an, is '*falāh*', a word we are all familiar with as we hear it five times a day "...*hayya 'ala l falāh!*" in every *adhan*. Interestingly enough, the same root *fa-lam-ha* is also used in the Arabic word for farmer – *fallāh*, the literal meaning of which is something like 'a person, who is successful by habit or by profession'. Here lies one key to the real meaning of success: The farmer of all professions is perhaps the one, who is least in control over the outcome of his efforts and labor; he tills the soil and throws the seed grains, and then he trusts in God. He leaves it to HIM to send lightening and rain and provide sunlight in the required measure to make the seeds germinate and grow, and he depends on HIS *qudrah* and *rahmah* to withhold hailstorms, droughts and pests while the plants are tender and vulnerable, and then again to provide dry weather to bring in the harvest – at least that is how it used to be.

"Tie your camel and trust in Allah", that is what the Noble Prophet – *salla llahu 'alayhi wa sallam* – told the Bedouin, meaning (in that particular context): do what is in your power to do, and what your knowledge and understanding of the situation prompts you to do, and what your conscience bids you to do, and then leave the affair to Allah!

In one of the battles the people who had no *iman* – or rather who were blinded by their self-importance, thinking they could influence the outcome – asked the Noble Prophet whether they had any say in the matter, and it was revealed: no you don't; the affair is entirely Allah's! And then they said: if we had had the say so-and-so would not have been killed in the battle, and again the revelation gave them the lie: "*Say: 'If you had been in your houses, those for whom death was destined, would have come out to meet their destiny.'*"¹

Man's ego is by its nature opposed to surrender, and it is the attributes of the lower self that the ego is thriving on, which makes it *Shaytan's* main access to us, and his most reliable client, and so he keeps nudging it with suggestions like: You are in charge. Who can stop you? You are the greatest. Although these are lies and only a ruse of *Shaytan* to bring us to fall, our lower self is too enchanted with these flatteries as to question their veracity, and so we go for it, right into his snare. This lie then becomes an illusion for us, and one of the offshoots of this illusion is the totally inhumane obsession with result-linked performance that has infested the value system and mindset of modern society. As a result of it we find on a large scale that man, who was honored by God to be the crown and pride of creation, has demoted himself into a stressed-out, worrying and enslaved creature, who neither finds the time nor the peace of mind to remember, communicate with and worship his Creator, which had been the purpose for which he was sent into this life in the first place, and which is the only means that he has for passing

¹ Surah 3:154 – Āli Imran

through it unharmed and sound. To sabotage this safe passage of course is the primary target of *Shaytan*.

Man's independence is real only in the sense that we have been given a free will, with which we can form intentions in respect of our own actions and make choices in respect of our values. Whether the intentions we make realize, or the choices we make turn out to be of benefit, is not in our hands anymore, because that depends to a great extent upon factors, we do not have any control over. For example, a traffic jam might prevent us from reaching a certain event, or an investment we made turns sour because of some international political developments that have a negative impact on the stock market, or you chose a study subject you are really interested in, and then you get a teacher, who you just cannot get along with, etc.

The more our objectives extend into the outside world, i.e. away from our personal private sphere, the less control we have over them. But even our self has aspects that are outside our conscious control and that can potentially prevent the realization of our intentions or influence our choices, like e.g. the autonomous systems of our body (you are overcome with tiredness and fall asleep, just when it was crucial to be fully alert), our emotional states (you fall hopelessly in love, or some personal tragedy hits you so hard that your ability to think rationally is knocked out completely), or the condition of our body's immune system (you catch a flu that totally incapacitates you). So it has become abundantly clear that in the end, the carrying out of our intentions and the outcome of our actions and choices does largely depend on circumstances and powers that we are not in control of.²

This either means that we cannot be entirely held responsible for our successes or failures, if we, as we have been taught and as it is common practice, measure the worth of our performance by the tangible results of our actions and efforts, or, otherwise we have to redefine the meaning of success and failure.

Although Islam does by no means relieve us of the responsibility for our actions, their success and failure in the sense of bringing the intended result is not, or only conditionally part of that responsibility, i.e. the value or quality of our actions is actually quite a different thing than their outcome. This difference is based on the variance of values in the Islamic and the materialistic outlook. In Islam the ethical value of an action weighs much heavier than its utility value, this is the reason why actions are judged and evaluated first and foremost by their underlying intentions.³ The intention is an expression of man's will, and the will belongs to the realm of the heart. The second ranking factor in the evaluation of our actions is the knowledge on which it is based, belonging to the realm of the mind, and thirdly the skill with which it is executed, the physical dimension.

² Sura 2:264 – Al Baqarah ‘... and they have no control over aught of what they earned...’

³ There is a famous prophetic tradition to the effect: ‘Surely, the action is worth only its intention...’

Results are not a criterion in the value of our actions, and their success and failure depends on whether they are accepted by Allah and liked by HIM, or rejected and causing His Displeasure.⁴

At the pinnacle of human civilization, Allah the Creator and Sustainer Lord of man declares:

*“This day I have perfected the agenda of your life-transaction [din] and completed MY Favor upon you, and I am pleased that your life-transaction be surrender [Islam].”*⁵

This is a statement of the most profound compassion and magnanimity: the agenda has been perfected; a reliable roadmap to salvation – success in this world and the next – has been laid open. The favor is complete; no one is denied access, no one is deprived. All we are asked to do is to surrender – to surrender to HIM what was always HIS anyway. An act, or rather a leap of consciousness, is all that is required to find – and that really means to partake – in HIS well pleasure, which is the sum total of success. The leap from the ego-illusion that I am in charge and independent to the realization that HE is the director of the whole magnificent, breathtaking drama of phenomenal existence, and the owner of all outcomes. *“...and all affairs are returned to Allah”*⁶

By surrendering our affair to HIM we are secure. We need not worry any more about the odds we are up against, about the enemy that is out to fell us, or about any other dangers that may be lurking on the way. HIS acceptance of our surrender has no strings attached to it; there is no price to be paid for it – it is priceless anyway – no target to be achieved; the only requirement on our part is sincerity and truthfulness.

If we look at the conditions, commonly known as the five pillars of Islam, there is nowhere any demand for results; it is always and only about performance (in accordance with one’s capability). The declaration of faith (*kalimah shahadah*) is not linked to any ‘result’, nor are the five ritual prayers (*salah*), nor is the fast (*sawm*), nor are welfare tax or charity (*zakah* and *sadaqah*), nor is the pilgrimage (*hajj*). Not even *jihad*, striving or fighting in the Way of Allah, implies in any way a demand that you should emerge as the victor, your duty is fulfilled by just doing it. If you emerge victorious that is your success; if you are killed in the course of it, you have embraced martyrdom, an even greater success.⁷

The same applies to the articles of faith – *Iman* – which is an internal matter altogether, and although it surely brings about changes in man’s conduct once it enters his heart, these are not

⁴ ‘...In order that you may not despair over matters that pass you by, nor exult over favors bestowed upon you. For Allah does not love any vainglorious boaster.’ Surah 57:23 – Al Hadid

⁵ Surah 5:3 – Al Ma’idah

⁶ Surah 57:5 – Al Hadid

⁷ Surah 4:74 – An Nisa

really results that one could achieve by one's endeavor for, but rather its attributes and manifestations of its light.⁸

And then *Ihsan* or excellence of worship, which is defined in the well-known *hadith* as 'worshipping Allah as if you can see HIM, and if you cannot see HIM, being totally aware that HE sees you;' again only performance without any link to a tangible result.

Wherever the root meaning of success – *fa-lam-ha* – appears in any form in the Qur'an we get the same picture:

"The believers who are self-effacing in their worship have achieved success..."⁹

"... and who has been saved from the cupidity of his lower self, those are the successful."¹⁰

Success by the definition of the Real is invariably linked to self restraint, to self denial and self mortification, the exact opposite of the materialistic success story. What is meant by the cupidity of the lower self is its claim on results and achievements, and here lies the root cause – or rather the very essence of failure, because the refusal to 'surrender' the outcome of our affairs, and the persistence in the illusion that we own the means and power to effect anything outside ourselves, means that we have altogether failed to understand the reality of our position within the creation and vis-à-vis the Creator.

This does not mean that we should not make efforts; quite to the contrary we must always be eager to offer and tap our full potential in the fulfillment of the need of every moment, but our attention must be directed at the performance, not at results. Only in this way can we hope to attain that excellence known as *ihsan*, and this in itself constitutes the highest degree of success, irrespective of the manifestation of results. If the results of our endeavors are good (and there is no reason to doubt that they will be) it is an extra bonus, if they are not what we had aspired for, it cannot lessen the value of our devotion, efforts and intentions, and that is what we will be judged by and rewarded for ultimately. For the *mumin/-ah*, whose first priority in whatever he/she does is to find the pleasure and acceptance of Allah, a result that does not match his/her expectations means that the expectation was not appropriate; the time or the place may not have been right, or sometimes we also aspire for things that might be harmful for us or useless in the long run, and Allah wants to protect us and remind us of our shortsightedness, then we can even give thanks to HIM (and score a further success).

The outcome of actions is usually in accordance with generally known patterns or laws of cause and effect, and therefore we mostly find that people, who do not submit are also 'successful' in

⁸ The notion that high ethical and moral standards can also be achieved and maintained without faith, as some nihilist and atheist philosophers would make us believe is a fallacy and wishful thinking, because it is cutting off those qualities from their source and sustenance; it is like trying to use a bouquet of fresh flowers as a lasting décor.

⁹ Surah 23:1 ff – Al Muminun

¹⁰ Surah 59:9 – Al Hashr / Surah 64:16 – Al Taghabun

terms of the manifestation of desired results, if they act intelligently – but their success is more like that of a skillful gambler, and it is just as limited as the jackpot they are looting, i.e. it ends there and then, and so it gives birth to greed for more and leads to compulsion and addiction. There is a huge difference between the encumbrances of their ‘success’ and the serenity of someone who knows that his efforts can never go waste, and who thus does not have to worry about their outcome.

“Say surely my worship and my sacrifice and my living and my dying are for Allah, the Sustainer Lord of all the worlds.”¹¹

¹¹ Surah 6:162 – Al An’am