The fourth commandment of the Qur’anic version of the Ten Commandments was revealed to solve the problem of infanticide, which was one of the most evil social practices of pre-Islamic Arabia. Infanticide is the practice of intentionally causing the death of an infant. Allah (SWT) says, “Do not kill your children for fear of poverty; it is We Who provide for them as well as for you. Killing them is surely a grave sin” (al-Isra’, 17:31). The tribe of Khuza’a among other tribes used to bury their new born daughters alive. Allah (SWT) forbade them and all other believers to stop this inhuman and heinous act. This commandment appears almost in the same words when Allah says, “…Do not kill your children for fear of poverty – it is We Who provide for you as well as for them…” (al-An’am, 6:151). The Qur’an admonishes people when it says, “And when the female infant, buried alive, is questioned; for what crime she was killed” (al-Takwir, 81:8-9).

Infanticide is nothing but murder, and murder as we know is one of the major punishable crimes. However, the practice of infanticide continues to be practiced, in the guise of population control, most notably in the world’s most populous countries like China and India. More infant females than males are killed because of the higher value placed on the male offspring. It is estimated that more than one million infants worldwide are killed each year because they are born as females. A study by the Chinese Academy of Social Science reveals that the imbalance between the sexes is so distorted that there are 111 million men in China who will not be able to find wives because of shortage of women. India, demographic statistics collected in the 19th century revealed that some villages had no girls at all, and in a total of thirty random villages, there were 343 boys to 54 girls. Bombay (Mumbai) in 1834 had only 603 girls.

Allah (SWT) exposes the attitude of men during the dawn of Islam and how they responded to the news of the birth of a baby girl. “When one of them is given news of the birth of a baby girl, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. In his shame he hides himself away from his people because of the bad news he has been given. Should he keep her and suffer contempt or bury her in the dust? How ill they judge!” (al-Nahl, 16:58-59). Unfortunately, this highly negative attitude towards daughters is prevalent till this day despite the fact that in many ways daughters are generally more remarkable than sons. Objectively speaking, daughters are generally more kind and compassionate than sons towards their parents. According to one saying of the ulema’ (scholars of Islam), “Daughters are a rahmah (mercy) and sons are a barakah (blessing).”

We may recall the story of Maryam (AS) when her mother vowed to Allah (SWT) that she would dedicate the offspring she was carrying in her womb to the services of the temple and her subsequent reaction when she bore a girl. “Remember when the wife of ´Imran said, ´My Lord, I have pledged to You what is in my womb, devoting it to Your service. Please accept my prayer. You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing. When she gave birth, she said, ´My Lord! I have given birth to a girl´ — and Allah knew very well what she had given birth to, male and female are not the same — ´and I have named her Maryam and placed her and her children in Your safekeeping from the accursed Shaytan´” (Aal “Imran, 3:35-36). Allah (SWT) had great plans for the child Maryam and hon-
ored her greatly. “And Maryam, the daughter of 'Imran, who guarded her chastity - We breathed Our Spirit into her. She confirmed the Words of her Lord and His Book, and was one of the obedient” (al-Tahrim:12). Elsewhere, the Qur’an says, “And when the angels said: Maryam, Allah has chosen you and purified you. He has chosen you over all other women. Maryam, obey your Lord and prostrate and bow with those who bow.” (Surah Al 'Imran: 42-43). We know that Maryam (AS) was the virgin mother of Prophet ‘Isa (AS). Allah (SWT) in His infinite wisdom gives whatever He wills to whomever He wills. “To Allah belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth. He creates whatever He wishes; He gives females to whomever He wishes, and gives males to whomever He wishes; or He gives them both sons and daughters; and He makes whoever He wishes barren. Truly He is All-Knowing, All-Powerful” (al-Shura, 42:49-50).

There may be several reasons for the inhuman practice of infanticide. Some believe that females bring shame and disgrace to the family. Others feel that girls do not carry on the name and honor of the family. Another reason may be that girls are considered a burden and of no help to their fathers, as it is the boys who usually carry on the family business. The primary reason, however, is what Allah (SWT) tells us and that is fear of poverty. In a hair-raising story one of the companions of the Prophet (SAW) narrates how at the time when his daughter was old enough to talk and comprehend, he took her to a well and pushed her into it, and the last words he heard her cry out were: “O my father! O my father!

Today, infanticide is practiced by terminating the pregnancy through abortion. The advancement in science and technology has made it easy to determine the gender of the fetus. This has contributed to the staggering rise in abortion. Unwanted pregnancy arising out of illicit sexual relationships is also a contributive factor to abortion. Statics reveal that in 1987 alone, there were 31 million legal abortions carried out throughout the world, not to speak of the 22 million clandestine cases which would add up to 53 million abortions or murders from the Islamic point of view. Abortion is murder. This can be inferred through a hadith narrated by Abu Hurairah (RA) in which it is learnt that the Prophet ordered a male or a female slave to be given by way of diyyah (blood money) for an aborted fetus. The woman on whom the penalty had been imposed had died. So the Prophet (SAW) ordered the blood money to be paid out of the inheritance that she left. It is well known that blood money is a compensation for murder.

The common argument justifying and absolving the practice of an early abortion is that the rooh (spirit) is blown into the fetus only on the completion of 120 days of conception. Invariably, a well known hadith is put forward to support this line of reasoning. The hadith is: Abdullah bin Mas’ud (RA) reported: Allah's Messenger (SAW) said: “Verily the constituents of one of you are collected for forty days in his mother's womb in the form of blood, after which it becomes a clot of blood in another period of forty days. Then it becomes a lump of flesh and forty days later Allah sends His angel to it with instructions concerning four things, so the angel writes down his livelihood, his death, his deeds, his fortune and misfortune…”

First of all, it is incorrect to assume that without the spirit, the developing embryo is lifeless. A seed may be assumed to be lifeless but the moment it is planted in the ground and the ground is watered, it begins to germinate, and it goes through various stages of development before it splits the earth and sprouts. Analogically, the same process taking place between a man and his wife is described in the Qur’an: “Your women are fertile fields for you, so come to your fertile fields however you like...” (al-Baqarah, 2:223). Therefore life can be said to have come into existence, even though partially, from the moment the male sperm fertilizes with the female ovum to form a zygote.

There is more than one ruling on the issue of abortion. Firstly, a few scholars from the four different madhahib (the four major Islamic juristic schools of thought) argue that abortion can be carried out before 120 days. This opinion seems to be based on the assumption that no life exists before 120 days since the soul is breathed only after 120 days. Modern science, however, shows that there is a kind of life, even though it is not a complete life, as modern equipment enables doctors to hear foetal heartbeats by the eighth week. Secondly, some scholars are of the opinion that abortion before 120 days is reprehensible (disapproved). Thirdly, some other scholars are of the opinion that abortion is permissible before 40 days but impermissible after 40 days. However, the opinion
of the majority of scholars, which is the preferred one according to the four madhahib, is that abortion from the moment of inception of pregnancy is forbidden. Abortion would only be legitimate if the mother has a health condition that makes the continuation of pregnancy a danger to her life. When a reliable medical source gives a proof indicating that continued pregnancy, even after the confirmation of the existence of life, would definitely lead to the mother’s death, abortion would be permissible on the legal maxim that the lesser evil is to be perpetrated in order to ward off the greater evil. The latter stand is also in line with the juridical rulings given by Hayyat Kaba’ir al-Ulema (Board of Senior Scholars) in their al-Fatawa al-Jamia’. It is also established from the general teachings of the Qur’an and the Sunnah that life in any form is to be preserved and is not to be destroyed except for a valid cause or reason.

Family planning through contraception is allowed in Islam. The purpose of contraception is to control the timing of births with the intent of distancing the occurrences of pregnancy or to delay it for a specific period of time. The contraceptive method that was practiced during the lifetime of the Prophet (SAW) is known as al-‘Azl and refers to the process of withdrawal by the man at the time of emission to prevent insemination of the ovum. The difference between contraception and abortion is that contraception is practiced to avoid pregnancy; there is no assault or crime against an existent human being, while abortion is a direct assault against the life of an existing human being.

Believers should never take recourse to abortion for fear of poverty or for fear of feeding the child. Allah (SWT) has taken upon Himself to provide for all His creatures. Besides the ayah 31 of Surat al-‘Isra and ayah 151 of Surat al-An’am quoted in the beginning of this discourse in which Allah (SWT) says that it is He who gives rizq (provisions/sustenance) to the parents as well as their children, there is also the ayah, which says, “There is no creature on the earth which is not dependent upon Allah for its provision…” (Hud, 11:6). We also have a hadith in which Umar ibn al-Khattab (RA) said that he heard the Prophet (SAW) say, “If you were to rely on Allah as He ought to be relied on, He would provide for you as He provides for the birds. They go out hungry in the morning and return full in the evening.”

There are many people who share stories of how new gates of rizq were opened for them on the arrival of a new born in the family. Indeed, children are a blessing. Islam encourages people to have children. It is reported that the Prophet (SAW) said: “Marry women who are loving and fertile (child-bearing), for I shall outnumber the peoples by you.” Celibacy and monasticism are against the principles of Islam brought forth by the Prophet (SAW). He made this clear when he told those companions who were considering ascetic forms of life: “I pray and I sleep; I fast and I break my fast; and I marry women. Whoever turns away from my way of life is not from me.”

As for daughters, there are numerous ahadith that speak about the blessings of having daughters. One of them states, "Whoever had three daughters and showed patience in their keeping, their pleasure and displeasure, Allah admits him to Paradise for his mercy over them. A man asked, 'And what about two daughters, O Messenger of Allah?' He said, 'And two daughters as well.' Another asked, 'O Messenger of Allah, what about one daughter?' He said, 'And one daughter as well.' The Prophet (SAW) himself was blessed with four great daughters: Zainab, Umm Kulthum, Ruqaiyyah, and Fatima; may Allah be pleased with them all.

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