



The Fifteenth Night of *Sha'bān*

For centuries, Muslims have spent the fifteenth night of the Holy month of *Sha'bān* in worship, both individually and collectively. Unfortunately a small group of Muslims have recently condemned such practices and have – in essence – tried to prevent Muslims from engaging in the remembrance of Allāh ﷻ on this holy night. In their view, the collective worship on this night is a reprehensible innovation (*bid'ā*) in Islam and should therefore be avoided at all costs. The aim of this short paper is to show the superiority of this night and the validity of worship on this occasion, both individually and collectively.

1.0 Introduction

The fifteenth night of *Sha'bān* is an important night in the Islamic calendar. In Arabic, this night is called '*Layla al-Nisf min Sha'bān*', meaning the 'middle night of *Sha'bān*'. It is also called *Layla al-Barā'a* or *Shab i Barā'at*, (*Shab i* is Persian for night), which means 'the night of immunity'. The night is so called because Allāh ﷻ offers immunity from the fire of Hell for those who repent to Him sincerely on this night.

From the Qur'ān, Sunna and the sayings, and actions of our pious predecessors, there is ample evidence to suggest that this a time of devotion and excessive worship.

2.0 Layla al-Nisf min Sha'bān in the Qur'ān

Allāh ﷻ states in the Qur'ān:

Indeed we revealed the Qur'ān on a blessed night, verily We are ever-warning. On this night, every matter of wisdom is ordained (44:3-4).

In *Tafsīr Rūb al-ma'ānī*, Imām al-Ālūsī writes that according to Ikrama and a group of scholars, the night being referred to in these verses is *Layla al-Nisf min Sha'bān*, which is also called *Layla al-Rabma*, *Layla al-Mubāraka* and *Layla al-Barā'a*. This is the night when all decisions are decreed for the following year.

Imām al-Qurtubī writes that the 'blessed night' being referred to is actually *Layla al-Qadr*, though he mentions that it is also said that it is referring to *Layla al-Nisf min Sha'bān*.

3.0 Layla al-Nisf min Sha'bān in the Sunna

i. Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī ؓ reports that our Master Muhammad ﷺ said:

Allāh ﷻ descends on His creation on the middle night of *Sha'bān* and forgives His creation, except for the polytheist and the one who shows animosity.¹

ii. The Mother of the Believers Lady 'Ā'isha ؓ reports that the Prophet ﷺ spent the middle night of *Sha'bān* in extensive prayer to the extent she thought he had died.²

iii. In his *Sunan*, Imām al-Tirmidhī (d. 279) reports that Lady 'Ā'isha ؓ narrated that:

'I missed Allāh's Messenger ﷺ during the night and found him in *al-Baqī'*. He said: 'Were you afraid that Allāh ﷻ and His Messenger would deal unjustly with you?' I said: 'Allāh's Messenger, I thought that you had gone to some of your other wives.' He (the Prophet ﷺ) said: 'Verily Allāh, the Exalted and Glorious, comes down to the heaven of the world in the middle night of *Sha'bān* and forgives sins more abundantly than the hairs of the goats of Banū Kalb.'³

¹ *Musnad Ahmad*, §6353.

² Reported by al-Bayhaqī and al-Ṭabarānī. Cited in *al-Islām Dīn al-wastiyya wa al-i'tidāl*, Glossary for National Curriculum for Religious Teaching, Syria.

³ *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, Bk. Of Fasting §670: *Musnad Ahmad* §24825.

This hadith has also been recorded by Imām Ahmad ibn Hanbal in his *Musnad* and Imām Ibn Māja (d. 273) in his *Sunan*.⁴ The hadith also confirms that visiting the graveyard on this night – an act closely associated with *Layla al-Nisf min Sha‘bān* – is the Sunna of our Messenger ﷺ.

iv. Al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jilānī (d. 561) writes in *Ghunya al-Tālibīn* that the Mother of the Believers Lady ‘Ā’isha ؓ once saw the Prophet ﷺ engaged in excessive worship one night. The Prophet ﷺ explained that the reason was because it was the middle night of *Sha‘bān* when:

The name of every child to be born in the following year is written on this night. The name of every person to die in the following year is also recorded on this night. The *rizq* (sustenance and provision) of each person descends on this occasion and the actions of people are raised to the heavens.⁵

4.0 *Layla al-Nisf min Sha‘bān* from the famous scholars

i. Imām al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204), one of the four great Imāms, said:

It has reached us that it is said that there are five nights when the *du‘ā’s* are accepted; the night of Friday, the night of *‘Īd al-Adhā*, the night of *‘Īd al-Fitr*, the first night of Rajab and the fifteenth of *Sha‘bān*.

This is perhaps partially based on the report of Imām Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179). He reports from Urwah, from Lady ‘Ā’isha ؓ who said she heard the Prophet ﷺ state that there are four nights in which the gates of righteousness are opened; the night of *‘Īd al-Adhā*, the night of *‘Īd al-Fitr*, the night of ‘Arafa (9th Dhu’l al-Ḥajj) and *Layla al-Nisf min Sha‘bān*.⁶

ii. Al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī wrote in *Ghunya al-Tālibīn*:

As for the ritual prayer traditional for the night of mid-*Sha‘bān*, it consists of one hundred cycles, including one thousand repetitions of *Sūrab al-Ikhlās*. This prayer is called *Salāb al-Kbayr*, and its blessings are many and varied. Our righteous predecessors used to gather to perform it in congregation. It contains much merit and rich reward. It is reported of al-Hasan al-Basrī, may Allāh be pleased with him, that he said, ‘Thirty of the Companions of the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ related to me that Allāh will look seventy times upon who performs this prayer on this night, and with each glance He will fulfil seventy of that person’s needs, the least of them being forgiveness.’⁷

iii. Regarding the night of mid-*Sha‘bān*, Shaykh Ibn Taymiyya wrote:

[Some] said there is no difference between this night and other nights of the year. However, the opinion of many of the people of learning and that of the majority of our [Hanbalī] colleagues...is that it is a night of superior merit, and this is what is indicated by the words of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, in view of the many ahādīth transmitted about it and in light of...the words and deeds transmitted from the early generations. Some of its merits have been narrated in the books of hadīth...⁸

iv. Mawlāna Muhammad Taqī ‘Uthmānī produced a separate pamphlet on *Layla al-Nisf min Sha‘bān*. In it he concluded:

⁴ The establishing of prayer and its Sunna §1379.

⁵ *Ghunya al-Tālibīn*. al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jilānī, p. 447, Farid Book Stall Publications, Lahore, Pakistan (1998).

⁶ *Ghunya al-Tālibīn*. Al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jilānī, p. 448, Farid Book Stall Publications, Lahore, Pakistan (1998).

⁷ p. 210. Haddad, G.F. (2005) *Sunna Notes - Studies in Hadīth & Doctrine* (Volume II; The Excellent Innovation in the Qur’ān and Hadīth. Aqsa Publications: UK.

⁸ p. 208, (Ibid.)

...The truth is that this is a night of *fadīla* (excellence). To stay awake at night and to spend it in worship is a means of reward...⁹

v. Ashraf ‘Alī Thānawī wrote in *Zawāl al-sunna*:

‘It is *mustahabb* (preferred) for men to visit the graveyard on *Layla al-Nisf min Sha‘bān* and spend the time in supplications and seeking forgiveness. This is proven from hadīth...to keep a fast on the fifteenth is [also] *mustahabb*.’¹⁰

5.0 Fasting on the middle day of *Sha‘bān*

The Mother of the Faithful ‘Ā’isha رضي الله عنها reports that the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم would fast abundantly during the month of *Sha‘bān*.¹¹ In another report, he explained that *Sha‘bān* is the month that a person’s actions ascend to the presence of Allāh ﷻ. ‘I desire that my actions are raised to Allāh ﷻ in the state that I am fasting’, the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم explained.

Ibn Rajab al-Hanbalī (d. 795) declared that fasting on this day is not forbidden. The Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم encouraged Muslims to fast in the middle part of each month, and the middle day of *Sha‘bān* falls under this general encouragement. The Prophet’s صلى الله عليه وسلم guidance on voluntary fasts is explicitly clear. He encouraged Muslims to keep voluntary fasts as a whole and pinpointed the days when fasting is prohibited, such as *‘Īd*. No scholar is of the opinion that *Layla al-Nisf min Sha‘bān* is one of the days when fasting has been prohibited by the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم.

6.0 Individual or collective worship?

The above section has clearly shown that *Layla al-Nisf min Sha‘bān* is a night of prayer and vigil. The question remains as to whether worship should be conducted individually or collectively.

Overall, there is no harm in commemorating this night collectively, and this includes the collective and congregational optional (*nafl*) prayers. Ibn ‘Abbās performed *Tahajjud* prayer behind the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم and he also led the mid-morning prayer with Anas, Umm Sulaym and Umm Harām رضي الله عنهن.¹²

Moreover, by performing such prayers collectively, the Muslims subject themselves to added mercy and blessings. Abū Hurayra reports that the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم said:

Verily for Allāh ﷻ are appointed angels who circulate the streets seeking the people of *dhikr*. When they find a community remembering Allāh...they spread their wings to the earthly sky. Their Lord ask, though He knows better: ‘What are My servants saying?’ They reply: ‘they are doing Your *Tasbīh*, Your *Takbīr*, Your *Hamd* and Your *Majd*...’¹³

This hadīth is clear indication that collective *dhikr* is reported to Allāh ﷻ and therefore not an act that contravenes *sharī‘a*.

In the famous *hadīth qudsī*, Allāh ﷻ says:

And if My servant remembers Me in a gathering, I will remember him in a gathering much better than his.¹⁴

⁹ p. 9. *Shab i barā‘at ki baqīqat*, Farid Book Depot Ltd, Delhi, India (2000).

¹⁰ Cited in *Shab i barā‘at ki baqīqat* (pp. 73-74) Farid Book Depot Ltd, Delhi, India (2000).

¹¹ *Ghunya al-Tālibin*. p. 441.

¹² p. 207. Haddad, G.F. (2005) *Sunna Notes - Studies in Hadīth & Doctrine* (Volume II; The Excellent Innovation in the Qur‘ān and Hadīth. Aqsa Publications: UK.

¹³ *Sabīh al-Bukhārī*, Bk. Of *Du‘ā’s*, Chapter: the Superiority of the remembrance of Allāh §5929.

¹⁴ *Sabīh al-Bukhārī*, Book of Tawhīd §6856.

In *Majmū'a al-fatāwa* (vol. XXIII), Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728) showed no objection to collective worship on this night. He was asked about prayers on *Layla al-Nisf min Sha'bān*. He replied:

When he reads on *Layla al-Nisf min Sha'bān* alone or in congregation – like our pious ancestors have done – then it is good (*absan*).

7.0 Is commemorating this night collectively *bid'a*?

Literally, *bid'a* means to initiate or create something upon an unprecedented example.¹⁵ Imām al-Harawī defines *bid'a* in *sharī'a* when he writes:

In Islamic *sharī'a*, *bid'a* is a new matter for which there is no textual proof from the Qur'ān or hadith.¹⁶

From this definition, we can clearly see that commemorating *Layla al-Nisf min Sha'bān* is not *bid'a*, because evidence is to be found for it in the Qur'ān and Sunna.

8.0 Conclusion

(i) The Prophet ﷺ attached significance to this night, in his sayings and practice. Therefore Muslims are encouraged to do the same, individually and collectively.

(ii) Commemorating this night can only be labelled as a reprehensible innovation if it does not comply with the Qur'ān and Sunna. To the contrary, worship on the mid-month night of *Sha'bān* is in compliance with the teachings of Allāh ﷻ and His Messenger ﷺ.

(iii) Owing to the numerous ahādīth on the issue, it is impossible to argue that *Layla al-Nisf min Sha'bān* has no importance. Certainly to describe worship on this night as *bid'a* is nothing short of scandalous. Scholars from all Islamic denominations accept the importance of this night, such as Ibn Taymiyya, Ashraf 'Alī Thānwī and Mawlāna Muhammad Taqī 'Uthmānī.

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From M Hussain Tahir & Family

May Allah ﷻ dedicate the reward of this work to all his family members that have left this world, *ameen*.

¹⁵ p. 415. *al-Sharb al-qawim fi hill alfāz al-sirāt al-mustaqīm*. 'Abd Allāh al-Harawī, Dār al-Masāmi; Beirut, Lebanon, 2004.

¹⁶ p. 415. Ibid.