

AL-ISRĀ WA AL-MĪRĀJ AND THE YEAR OF SORROW

Dr Hafiz Ather Hussain al-Azhari

Introduction

The night of *al-Isrā wa al-Mīrāj* stands as the most blessed and significant night in the life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. It was the night upon which Allah invited his Beloved ﷺ to the celestial realm, following a miraculous journey to the land of al-Quds (Jerusalem).

This short paper focuses on a single aspect of this faith-strengthening event: its timing. According to Imam al-Nawawī, the miraculous night of *al-Isrā wa al-Mīrāj* occurred in the tenth year of prophethood (*nubuwwa*), and seventeen months prior to the Migration (hijra). This year is often referred to as the ‘Year of Sorrow’ (*‘Ām al-Huzn*).

Why was it called the ‘Year of Sorrow’?

Of the two places he blessed with his residence, Makka presented the greater challenges for the Prophet ﷺ. The faithless Makkans displayed scant interest in Islam, instead subjecting the Messenger ﷺ to various forms of abuse – verbal, physical, and mental. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ endured a harsh social boycott, compelled to live outside the blessed city for a period. This period would have been considerably more arduous for the Prophet ﷺ were it not for the support of (i) his uncle Abū Ṭālib and (ii) his wife Khadija – may Allah be pleased with her. The former shielded him from the Quraysh, while the latter provided solace and comfort amidst the abuse he faced. Tragically, both passed away during this ‘Year of Sorrow’.

Lady Khadija – may Allah be pleased with her – born fifteen years before the Prophet ﷺ, was a pious woman and accomplished businesswoman. She became the first wife of the Prophet ﷺ, who cherished her deeply and found comfort in her counsel. Allah blessed them with four daughters and two sons: Qāsim, ‘Abd-Allāh, Zaynab, Ruqayyah, Fāṭima and Umm Kulthūm ﷺ.

Furthermore, the episode of Ta’if deeply wounded the Prophet ﷺ. He ﷺ journeyed there to invite the people to Islam, but the inhabitants responded with blasphemous mistreatment. Seeking refuge in a garden and divine assistance, the following verse was revealed:

و لا تك في ضيق مما يمكرون ان الله مع الذين اتقوا و الذين هم محسنون
Do not feel confined because of what they plot. Indeed,
Allah is with those who fear him, and those who are doers
of good (16:127-8).

Allah instructed His Messenger ﷺ not to feel constricted (the meaning of *dayq*), confined and sorrowful. Shortly thereafter, *al-Isrā wa al-Mīrāj* took place. It was as if Allah was saying: ‘O Prophet, if the earth feels confining, then the heavens welcome your presence. If the infidels are inhospitable, then Allah and His angels certainly are.’

These factors combined to make *al-Isrā wa al-Mīrāj* an exceptionally precious gift from Allah Almighty to the Prophet ﷺ. As noted by *Ziā al-Umma* Pir Muḥammad Karam Shah al-Azharī, the challenging circumstances made it the most opportune moment for the Night Journey. Despite the manifest hardship he ﷺ was facing, Allah reiterated His closeness and love by inviting him to the celestial realms.

Lessons for Us Today

- Allah never abandons His righteous servants. He is present when we are most in need of His help. All that is required is faith and patience.
- Today, we face similar trials – hardship, abuse, oppression, prejudice, and more. Our duty is to turn to the books of *sīra* and learn how our master Muhammad ﷺ responded to such adversity. His response was prostration before Allah; his response was patience, optimism, and faith.
- No one endured greater hardship than the Prophet ﷺ. Whenever we encounter difficulties, we should recall his example.

- Our Messenger ﷺ experienced immense pain, anxiety, and hardship, yet ultimately he received a gift bestowed upon no other prophet or messenger: *al-Isrā wa al-Mi'rāj*. Similarly, in our lives, unparalleled joy often follows periods of profound difficulty. A woman experiences no greater joy than the birth of her child, but it is preceded by nine months of hardship. The feeling of passing a crucial examination is unmatched, and the stress, sleepless nights, and arduous revision are quickly forgotten. Nothing is more demanding than reciting the Qur'an during *Ṣalāt al-Tarāwīḥ*, yet nothing brings greater joy to those who have memorized it.

Thus, Allah grants happiness and ease, but, as demonstrated by *al-Isrā wa al-Mi'rāj*, it often follows severe hardship. We simply need to have patience.

* * *