



FIFTEENTH NIGHT OF SHA‘BĀN

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For centuries, Muslims have spent the fifteenth night of the Holy month of Sha‘bān in worship, both individually and collectively. Regrettably, a small group of Muslims has recently condemned such practices and, in essence, attempted to prevent Muslims from engaging in the remembrance of Allah on this sacred night. They believe that the collective worship on this night is a reprehensible innovation (*bid‘ah*) in Islam and, therefore, should be strictly avoided.

This brief paper aims to reveal this night’s superiority and confirm the legitimacy of worship on this occasion, both individually and collectively.

INTRODUCTION

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

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

LAYLA AL-NIṢF MIN SHA‘BĀN IN THE QUR‘AN

Allah Most High states in the Qur‘an: “*Indeed, we revealed the Qur‘an on a blessed night, verily We are ever-warning. On this night, every matter of wisdom is ordained*” (44:3-4).

In *Tafsīr Rūh al-ma‘ānī*, Imām al-Ālūsī writes that according to ‘Ikrimah and a group of scholars, the night being referred to in these verses is *Laylah al-Niṣf min Sha‘bān*, which is also called *Laylah al-Raḥmah*, *Laylah al-Mubārakah* and *Laylah al-Barā‘ah*. This is the night when all decisions are decreed for the following year.

Al-Qurṭubī writes that the ‘blessed night’ being referred to is actually *Laylah al-Qadr*, though he mentions that it is also said that it is referring to *Laylah al-Niṣf min Sha‘bān*.

LAYLA AL-NIŞF MIN SHA'BĀN IN THE SUNNAH

1. Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī رضي الله عنه reports that the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم said, "Allah looks upon His creation on the middle night of Sha'bān and forgives all of His creation, except for the idolater or one harbouring malice."
2. The Mother of the Believers, Lady 'Ā'ishah رضي الله عنها, reported that the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم engaged in such extensive prayer on the middle night of Sha'bān that she feared he had passed away.
3. In his *Sunan*, al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892) reports that Lady 'Ā'ishah رضي الله عنها narrated that,

"I could not find the Messenger of Allah صلى الله عليه وسلم one night and I went out and found him in *al-Baqī*." He صلى الله عليه وسلم asked, 'Did you fear that Allah and His Messenger would treat you unjustly?' I replied, "O Messenger of Allah, I assumed you had visited your other wives." The Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم said, 'Indeed, on the night of mid-Sha'bān, Allah, Mighty and Majestic is He, [mercy] descends to the heavens of the world and [He] pardons more sins than the number of hairs on the sheep of [Banū] Kalb."

This hadīth has also been recorded by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal in his *Musnad* and Ibn Mājah (d. 273) in his *Sunan*. The hadīth also confirms that visiting the graveyard on this night—an act closely associated with *Laylah al-Niṣf min Sha'bān*—is the Sunnah of our Messenger صلى الله عليه وسلم.

4. In *Ghunya al-Ṭālibīn*, Sayyid 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 561/1166, Baghdad) related that the Mother of the Believers, Lady 'Ā'ishah, once observed the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم engaged in intense worship on a particular night. He صلى الله عليه وسلم explained that it was the middle night of Sha'bān: "The names of every child to be born in the following year are recorded. The names of those who will die in the coming year are recorded. On this night, each individuals' *rizq*, or sustenance, is determined, and the actions of man ascend to the heavens."

1. Imām al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/820, al-Fuṣṭāṭ, Egypt), one of the four great Imams, said, “It has reached us that it is said that there are five nights when *du‘ās*, or supplications, are accepted: the night of Friday, the night of Eid al-Adha, the night of Eid al-Fitr, the first night of Rajab and the fifteenth of Sha‘bān.”

This may be partially based on the account of Mālik (died 179/795, Medina). He cites Urwah, who relates from Lady ‘Ā’ishah رضي الله عنها, that she heard the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم that there are four nights when the gates of righteousness are open: the night of Eid al-Adhā, the night of Eid al-Fitr, the night of ‘Arafah (9 Dhu al-Ḥijjah) and the fifteenth night of Sha‘bān.

2. Sayyid ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī wrote in *Ghunyah al-Ṭālibīn*:

As for the ritual prayer traditional for the night of mid-Sha‘bān, it consists of one hundred cycles, including one thousand repetitions of *Sūrah al-Ikhlās*. This prayer is called *Salāh al-Khayr*, 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 صلى الله عليه وسلم 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.’

3. Regarding the night of mid-Sha‘bān, Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328, Damascus, Syria) wrote:

“[Some] argue that this night is no different from other nights of the year. However, the opinion of many of learned me and that of the majority of our [Ḥanbalī] colleagues...is that it is a night of superior merit, and this is what is indicated by the words of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, in view of the many prophetic traditions 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 Hadith...”

4. Mufti Taqī ‘Uthmānī published a pamphlet about *Laylah al-Niṣf min Sha‘bān*. In his conclusion, he stated: “This is a night of exceptional virtue (*faḍīlah*). To remain awake in worship during this night is means of reward...”
5. Ashraf ‘Alī Tahānawī wrote in *Zawāl al-sunnah*: ‘It is recommended (*mustahabb*) for men to visit the graveyard on *Laylah al-Niṣf min Sha‘bān* and spend the time in supplications and seeking forgiveness. This is proven from hadith...and to fast on the fifteenth is [also] recommended.’

FASTING ON THE MIDDLE NIGHT OF SHA‘BĀN

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

Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī (d. 795/1393) 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 Eid. No scholar is of the opinion that *Laylah al-Niṣf min Sha‘bān* is one the days when fasting has been prohibited by the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم.

INDIVIDUAL OR COLLECTIVE WORSHIP?

The above section has clearly shown that *Laylah al-Niṣf 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 prayers (*nafl*). Ibn ‘Abbās performed *Tahajjud* prayer behind the Prophet ﷺ and he also led the mid-morning prayer with Anas, Umm Sulaym and Umm Harām.

Moreover, by performing such prayers collectively, the Muslims subject themselves to added mercy and blessings. Abū Hurayrah reports that the Prophet ﷺ said:

“Indeed, Allah has appointed angels who roam the streets searching for those engaged in dhikr. When they find a group of people remembering Allah...they expand their wings as high as the earthly sky. Their Lord enquires, even though He knows: ‘What are My servants saying?’ They respond: ‘They are glorifying You (*tasbīh*), magnifying You (*takbīr*), praising You (*hamd*), and extolling Your Majesty (*majd*)...”

This hadith is clear indication that collective *dhikr* is reported to Allah Most High and therefore not an act that contravenes the shariah.

In the famous *ḥadīth qudsī*, Allāh Most High says, “And if My servant remembers Me in a gathering, I will remember him in a gathering much better than his.”

In *Majmū‘a al-fatāwā* (vol. 23), Ibn Taymiyyah expressed no opposition to communal worship on this night. He was asked about prayers on *Laylah al-Niṣf min Sha‘bān*. He replied: When he reads on *Laylah al-Niṣf min Sha‘bān* alone or in congregation – like our pious ancestors have done – then it is good (*aḥsan*).

IS COMMEMORATING THIS NIGHT COLLECTIVELY *BID‘AH*?

Literally, *bid‘ah* means to initiate or create something upon an unprecedented example. Al-Harawī defines *bid‘ah* in shariah when he writes: In shariah, *bid‘ah* is a new matter for which there is no textual proof from the Qur’an or hadith.

From this definition, we can clearly see that commemorating *Laylah al-Niṣf min Sha'bān* is not *bid'ah*, because evidence is to be found for it in the Qur'an and Sunnah.

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'an and Sunnah. To the contrary, worship on the middle night of Sha'bān is in compliance with the teachings of Allah Most High and His Messenger ﷺ.
- iii. Owing to the numerous ahadith on the issue, it is impossible to argue that *Laylah al-Niṣf min Sha'bān* has no importance. Certainly to describe worship on this night as *bid'ah* is nothing short of scandalous. Scholars from all Islamic denominations accept the importance of this night, such as Ibn Taymiyyah, Ashraf 'Alī Tahānawī and Mufti Taqī 'Uthmānī.