

Virtues of the 15th Night

Sha`ban in the eighth month of the Islamic calendar. There are numerous ahadith narrated about the 15th night of Sha`ban, indicating that it has a certain distinction over ordinary nights. While some of these narrations are undeniably weak, there are others which have been graded as reliable by some hadith experts. Among the most authentic of these are the following two:

1. Hafiz Ibn Hibban recorded in his "Sahih," [vol XII, p. 481; #5665] :

From Makhul, from Malik ibn Yukhamir, from Mu`adh ibn Jabal (may Allah be pleased with him) from the Prophet, (may Allah bless him and his Household and grant them peace), he said,

"Allah looks at His creation in the night of mid-Sha`ban; He forgives all His creation except for a mushrik (polytheist) or a mushahin (one who has illegitimate hatred or enmity of others)."

As is evident, this hadith was regarded as reliable by Ibn Hibban, who was a hadith expert, and a group of later hadith scholars have also judged it as as hasan li-ghayrihi (good, through the support of other such narrations).

Some other versions mention other categories of sinners as not being forgiven on that night: those who commit zina (fornication or adultery) or murder.

2. It is narrated that Ummul-Mu'mineen `A'ishah awoke one night to find the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him and his Household) missing, and so she went out to look for him. She found him in the Baqee` cemetery, with his head raised to the Heavens [it is recommended in general to visit cemeteries for the purpose of reminding ourselves of death, and to ask Allah to forgive the deceased Muslims]. After helping to further reassure her, it is reported that he said, "Surely Allah, the Possessor of Blessings, the Exalted, descends to the lowest heaven [with a meaning appropriate to Allah's majesty; not to be likened to the descending of finite, spatial, created things] on the night of mid-Sha`ban, and forgives more [people] than the the hairs on the sheep of [the tribe of] Kalb."

[Narrated by Tirmidhi, who points out that its chain of narration is discontinuous, although we may note that such discontinuity is not detrimental to authenticity according to some scholars. Also narrated by Ahmad, Ibn Majah and others. Ibn Rajab describes this narration as one of the best on the subject.]

It may also be noted that according to `Ikrimah (one of the students of Ibn `Abbas), the 15th of Sha`ban is the night on which "is made distinct every precise matter," [Qur'an, 44:4] i.e. the night on which the destiny for the coming year is written. However, the majority of exegetes have disagreed with him, maintaining that this occurs on Laylatul-Qadr, as suggested by Surah al-Qadr. [see for example: Tafsir al-Qurtubi, (16/117-119); also Lata'if al-Ma`arif by Ibn Rajab, p. 204]

2. General Conduct

As this night approaches, we should examine ourselves and try to rid ourselves of any traces of <shirk> (associating partners with Allah in deeds, words or belief), and also make sure that we are avoiding the other sins mentioned as hindering forgiveness: illegitimate hatred, zina and murder. Shirk, murder and zina are the most terrible sins, as indicated by the following

hadith:

Ibn Mas`ud said that he asked the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him and his Household), "Which sin is greatest?" He said,

- "That you associate a partner with Allah, although He has created you."

- "Then which?"

- "That you kill your child out of fear it will share your food."

- "Then which?"

- "That you commit adultery with your neighbor's wife."

Then he recited the verse of the Qur'an meaning, "And [the believers are] those who do not call upon any other god beside Allah, nor unrightfully kill the soul which Allah has prohibited, not commit zina..." [Qur'an, 25:68]

[Narrated by Bukhari, Muslim and others]

And regarding rancor, another authentic hadith tells us,

"Deeds are presented [to Allah] every monday and thursday, whereupon Allah, the Mighty and Majestic, forgives on that day every person who does not associate any [partner] with Allah, except someone who has rancor between himself and his brother, [for whom] Allah then says [to the angels], 'Leave these two until they reconcile.'" [Narrated by Abu Dawud and Tirmidhi]

Let us give up rancor we may have toward any Muslim - living or dead.

3. Extra Worship

Hafiz Ibn Taymiyyah mentions in his "Fatawa" that scholars have differed about this night; some of the salaf used to stay up on it, and the night has virtue. It was actually some of prominent scholars of the Tabi`een (the second generation from the Prophet) in Syria, among them MakHool, who started the practice of performing optional prayer (tahajjud/qiyam) specifically during this night. On the basis of the ahadith mentioned above, fortified by more explicit but weaker ahadith, and by the practice of these Tabi`een, it is recommended, according a group of scholars, to perform optional worship on this night.

Hafiz Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali says,

"So, it is appropriate for the believer to free himself [from worldly pursuits] on that night, [and apply himself] to the remembrance of Allah, making du`a to Him to forgive sins, conceal faults, and alleviate hardships, and [it is appropriate] to precede this with repentance (tawbah) for Allah forgives on this night those who repent."

[Ibn Rajab, Lata'if al-Ma`arif, p. 201. He earlier concludes, on p. 200, that the verdict of recommended is that of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal's school. Similarly, the Hanafis consider it recommended, as stated in Maraqi al-Falah (p. 154) and Hashiyat Ibn `Abidin (Shami) (2/469).]

It may be noted, however, that other scholars are of the view that there is no special significance in performing optional worship on this night (although it is permissible, as on any ordinary night of the year), since they viewed all ahadith on the subject as weak, and considered that the practice of a group of Tabi`een does not by itself make it recommended. [Ibn Rajab [op. cit.] cites that the Malikis consider it a bid`ah, and al-Ramli's Nihayat al-Muhtaj (2/124) expresses the same view for the Shafi`i school.]

Whichever of the two views we choose to follow, we should tolerate both, since there exists scholarly disagreement.

It may also be noted that there is essential unanimity that there is no specific form of worship exclusive to this night, and so those who wish to offer `ibadah in it may perform the usual form of tahajjud (qiyam) prayers, preferably 8 rak`ah, and/or other worships such as recitation of Qur'an or remembrance of Allah. It is much preferred to offer such worship individually and privately; indeed most scholars consider it a bid`ah (reprehensible innovation in religion) to gather to offer such supererogatory worship in congregation. [see for example: Lata'if al-Ma`arif, p. 200; Maraqi al-Falah, p. 154 and Radd al-Muhtar, (2/469)] There is also unanimity on the baselessness of the hadith describing a special form of salah for this night - a salah comprising 100 rak`ah in each of which one recites Surat al-Ikhlās 10 times. [See : al-Masnoo` fi Ma`rifat al-Hadith al-MawDoo`, by Mulla `Ali al-Qari, pp. 259-260; Also al-Majmoo` SharH al-muhadh-dhab, by Imam al-Nawawi, (3/549)]