

Laila Nisf Sha‘bān.

The aim of this paper is to show that the middle night of Sha‘bān is an important night in the Islamic calendar. Unfortunately, there are many Muslims – of the Salafi/Wahhabī orientation – that argue that there is no evidence to suggest the religious significance of this night. They declare the worship associated with this night as a reprehensible innovation (Bid‘a). As the article will show, such an opinion stems from ignorance and neglect.

Introduction.

The fifteenth night of Sha‘bān is an important night in the Islamic calendar. In Arabic, this night is called ‘Laila Nisf Sha‘bān’, meaning the ‘middle night of Sha‘bān.’ It is also called Laila (or *Shabe*, Persian for ‘night’) Barā‘at, which means ‘the night of immunity’. The night is so called because Allāh offers immunity from the fire of Hell for those who repent to Him sincerely on this night. From the Qur‘ān, Sunna and sayings & actions of our pious predecessors, there is ample evidence to suggest that this a time of devotion and excessive worship. This article is merely a small reflection of the wealth of material available highlighting the significance of Laila Nisf Sha‘bān.

Evidence from the Holy Qur‘ān.

Allāh says in the Qur‘ān:

Hā-Mīm. By the manifest Book. Verily We sent it down on a blessed night; verily We are ever warning. Therein that night, every matter of ordainment is decreed. (44: 1-3).

Imām Qurtubī writes in his *Tafsīr* that the ‘blessed night’ being referred to in this verse is Laila al-Qadr. This is the opinion which most scholars allude to, include the Companion Ibn Abbās (may Allāh be pleased with him). However, Imām Qurtubī also accepts that some scholars believe it is referring to Laila Nisf Sha‘bān. (vol. XVI, p. 84).¹ Ikrama, for example, believes that the night in this verse is Laila Nisf Sha‘bān, the night when all decisions are decreed for the following year.

¹ Tafsir Qurtubi. Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, Beirut, Lebanon (2004).

Evidence from the Ahādīth of the Prophet.

There are many Ahādīth reported directly from the Prophet (PBUH) regarding the excellence of the middle night of Sha'bān. In terms of authenticity, these Ahādīth are of varying grades. Some are reliable whereas some are not. But overall, there are sufficient reports on the subject matter to indicate the importance of this night.

Hadīth number one.

In his *Sunan* (Book of Fasts, Hadīth no. 670), Imām Tirmidhī reports from Ahmad ibn Manī', from Yazīd ibn Hārūn, from al-Hajjāj ibn Artā, from Yahyā ibn Abū Kathīr, from Urwah, from the Mother of the Faithful Ā'isha (may Allāh be pleased with her), who reports:

'I missed Allāh's Messenger (PBUH) during the night and found him in [Janna] al-Baqī'² with his head raised to the skies. He said: 'Were you afraid that Allāh and His Messenger would deal unjustly with you?' I said: 'O Messenger of Allāh! I thought that you had gone to some of your other wives.' The Prophet 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 even more abundant than the hair of the goats of Banū Kalb.'³

This Hadīth has also been recorded by Imām Ahmad ibn Hanbal in his *Musnad*⁴ and Imām Ibn Māja in his *Sunan*⁵. The Hadīth also confirms that visiting the graveyard on this night – an act closely associated with Laila Nisf Sha'bān – is the Sunna of our Messenger.

Hadīth number two.

Ibn Māja reports from the Hadīth of Abū Mūsā, from the Prophet (PBUH) that:

'Allāh looks over (*Yattali'u*) His entire creation on Laila Nisf Sha'bān, and he forgives all of them, except the polytheist and the quarrelsome.'

² This is the graveyard in Madina Sharif, adjacent to the Prophet's Mosque.

³ Banu Kalb was mentioned by the Prophet because they possessed the most livestock at that time.

⁴ The remaining Ansar: Hadīth no. 24825.

⁵ The establishing of prayer and its Sunna: Hadīth no. 1379.

Hadīth number three.

Imām Ahmad reports from the Hadīth of Abd Allāh ibn Amr, from the Prophet (PBUH) that:

‘Allāh looks over (*Yattali’u*) His entire creation on Laila Nisf Sha‘bān, and he forgives all of them, except two: the quarrelsome and the murderer.’

Hadīth number four.

It is reported from the Hadīth of Uthmān ibn Abū al-Ās, to the Prophet (PBUH) that:

‘When the middle night of Sha‘bān appears, a caller (i.e. Allāh) proclaims: ‘is there anyone seeking forgiveness that I can forgive? Is there anyone making a request that I can fulfill? So no one will ask except that he will be given [on this night], except the adulterer or the polytheist.’

Hadīth number five.

Hadrat Shaykh Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī writes in *Gunya al-Tālibīn* that the mother of the faithful Ā‘isha (may Allāh be pleased with her) once saw the Prophet (PBUH) engaged in excessive worship one night. The Prophet 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.’⁶ (p. 447).

Support from the pious ancestors.

a. Imām Shāfi‘ī (may Allāh be pleased with him) famously remarked:

‘It has reached us that it is said that there are five nights when the *Du‘ās* 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. He reports from Urwah, from Ā‘isha (may Allāh be pleased with her) who said she heard the Prophet (PBUH) state that there are four nights in which the gates of

⁶ *Gunya al-Talibin*. Shaykh Abdul Qadir Jilani. p. 447. Farid Book Stall Publications, Lahore, Pakistan (1998).

righteousness are opened; the night of Īd al-Adhā, the night of Īd al-Fitr, the night of Arafa (9th Zul al-Hajj) and Laila Nisf Sha'bān.⁷

b. Shaykh Ibn Taymiyya was asked about prayers on Laila Nisf Sha'bān. He replied, 'When the Muslim reads on Laila Nisf Sha'bān alone or in congregation – like our pious ancestors have done – then it is better (*Ahsan*).⁸

c. The Successors (Tabi'ūn) from the people of Syria would show respect to the middle night of Sha'bān and would exert great effort in performing worship on this night. This was done collectively in the mosque. Support for this is found from the likes of Khālid ibn Ma'dān, Makhūl, Luqmān ibn Āmir and Ishāq ibn Rāhawiyya.

d. Atā ibn Yasār was reported to have said:

'After Laila Qadr, there is no night better than Laila Nisf Sha'bān. Allāh descends to His creation on this night and forgives all of His creation; except the polytheist, the quarrelsome and the one who severs family ties.'

e. Most of this article has been based on the excellent work *Latā'if al-Ma'ārif fī mā li Mawāsīm al-Ām min al-Wazā'if*, by Imām, Hāfiz, Zayn al-Dīn Abū al-Farj Abd al-Rahmān ibn Ahmad ibn Rajab al-Hanbalī (d. 795 A.H.). His own conclusion is that:

'It is desirable for the believer to dedicate this night to the remembrance of Allāh, to pray for the forgiveness of sins...and to seek repentance. For verily Allāh accepts the repentance of the one who turns to Him.'

f. Hadrat Shaykh Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī has written extensively about the superiority of Sha'bān in general and its middle night in particular in *Gunya al-Tālibīn*. He also prescribes many optional prayers (Nafī) that should be performed on this night.

⁷ *Gunya al-Talibin*. Shaykh Abdul Qadir Jilani. p. 448. Farid Book Stall Publications, Lahore, Pakistan (1998).

⁸ *Majmū'a al-Fatāwa*, Shaykh Ibn Taymiyya, vol. XXIII.

g. Moulāna Muhammad Taqī Uthmānī produced a separate pamphlet on Laila Nisf Sha'bān. In it he concluded:

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

h. Ashraf Alī Thānvī wrote in *Zawāl al-Sunna*:

‘It is *Mustahab* (preferred) for men to visit the graveyard on Laila Nisf Sha'bān and spend the time in supplications and seeking forgiveness. This is proven from Hadīth...to keep a fast on the fifteenth is Mustahab.’¹⁰

Fasting on the middle day of Sha'bān.

The Mother of the Faithful Ā'isha (may Allāh be pleased with her) reports that the Prophet (PBUH) would fast abundantly during the month of Sha'bān (*Gunya al-Tālibīn*, p. 441). In another report, he explained that Sha'bān is the month that a person's actions ascend to the presence of Allāh. 'I desire that my actions are raised to Allāh in the state that I am fasting', the Prophet (PBUH) explained. Ibn Rajab al-Hanbalī declared that fasting on this day is not forbidden. The Prophet (PBUH) 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 (PBUH) guidance on voluntary fasts are 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 Laila Nisf Sha'bān is one the days when fasting has been prohibited by the Prophet (PBUH).

Objections on Laila Nisf Sha'bān.

'Giving significance to the night of 15th Sha'bān, visiting graveyards, doing extra Ibādah (worship) and offering extra Nawāfil Salāh with the intention of specifically doing so on the occasion of 15th Sha'bān, and keeping awake for the whole night of 15th Sha'bān and encouraging others to do the same - all these are Bid'a (innovation). The Prophet and the Sahaba never did so nor commanded Muslims to do so.'

⁹ p. 9. *Shabe Baraat ki Haqiqat*. Farid Book Depot Ltd, Delhi, India (2000).

¹⁰ p.17:10. Cited in *Shabe Baraat ki Haqiqat* (pp. 73-74) Farid Book Depot Ltd, Delhi, India (2000).

The Ahādīth cited above show that (a) Prophet (PBUH) did give importance to this night (b) did engage in extra worship as a result (c) did visit the graveyard (as he was in Janna al-Baqī where Ā'isha found him). Therefore such cannot be deemed as Bid'a.

The Muslims who do not attach importance to this night take the stance that until a direct, verbal order from the Prophet is not found instructing us to spend this night in worship, we cannot commemorate this night at all. They fail to understand that the Prophet does not have to explicitly order us to worship on this night in order for it to be incumbent on us. This is because any of his acts automatically become a Sunna for us. If the Prophet (PBUH) did something in the field of worship, and did not want his followers to emulate him, he always forbade them clearly. For example Imām al-Bukhārī reports in his *Sahīh* that the Prophet (PBUH) forbade his Companions from keeping continuous fasts¹¹. One of the Companions enquired, 'O Messenger of Allāh! But you keep continuous fasts.' The Prophet (PBUH) replied:

'Who from amongst you is like me? When I go to sleep my Lord gives me food and drink.'¹²

'We don't find any evidence of such things [in commemorating Laila Nisf Sha'bān] in the entire authentic Sirah of the Prophet and his Companions. According to Allāma Ibn Rajab Abū Bakr Turtoshī, Suyutī, Shoukanī etc. all the Ahādīth pertaining to the subject are weak and unacceptable.'

Admittedly, there are a handful of fabricated Ahādīth on the superiority of Laila Nisf Sha'bān. There is a report where the Prophet (PBUH) was alleged to have said:

'When Laila Nisf Sha'bān appears, then revive the night [in worship] and fast its day.'

Most scholars declare this particular Hadīth to be weak and some suggest it is fabricated. But that does not mean that *all* the Ahādīth on the issue are also fabricated.¹³ Shaykh Ibn Taymiyya himself admits that there are sufficient, acceptable Ahādīth on Laila Nisf Sha'bān to justify its importance:

'[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

¹¹ In Arabic, this is called al-Wisāl. It means keeping a fast throughout the day and night for many days.

¹² *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Book of Hudud (punishments). Hadīth no. 6345.

¹³ The case is similar to Ahādīth which extol the virtue of certain Surahs of the Qur'ān. Certainly, there are a handful of Ahādīth which are forged and fabricated but that does not imply all reports mentioning the excellence of certain Surahs are also forged. The *Sahīh* of Imām al-Bukhārī and Imām Muslim are full of sound, authenticated Ahādīth on the superiority of Surahs like Surah Ikhhlās and Surah Baqara.

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...'¹⁴

By declaring the Ahādīth on Laila Nisf Sha'bān as 'weak *and* unacceptable', the Salafi/Wahhabī's show their true ignorance on the very basics rules of Islamic Sharī'ah. Hypothetically speaking, even if all the Ahādīth on this night were weak (Da'īf) and not fabricated, the classical scholars agree that it is still legitimate to use this in the field of *Targhīb wa Tarhīb* (encouraging good acts and warning against evil acts). The famous Hadīth master Ibn al-Salāh writes:

'According to the scholars of Hadīth, it is permissible to adopt leniency in the chain and in the narration of Da'īf traditions, other than Mawdū' (fabricated) Ahādīth, without having to explain its weakness. This is not [however] where the text deals with the attributes of Allāh, or Islamic rulings like the forbidden and permitted things. It is [only] permissible where the text refers to admonition, stories, the superiority of certain actions and in all areas of preaching [al-Targhīb wa al-Tarhīb]. Amongst the scholars who have reported leniency with such narrations are Abd al-Rahmān ibn Mahdī and Ahmad ibn Hanbal.'¹⁵

In short, there are sufficient sound reports on Laila Nisf Sha'bān to prove its legitimacy. Even if all reports were weak, it is still acceptable to use them, because they are not fabricated.

'Besides Shaykh Nāsir al-Dīn Albānī also said that offering special prayers on the night of Shab-e-barāt is an innovation.'

Shaykh Nāsir al-Dīn Albānī, an infamous Salafī, does accept the importance of this night.

In volume three of *Salsala al-Ahādīth al-Sahīha*, he cited eight Ahādīth regarding the superiority of Laila Nisf Sha'bān. After mentioning them all, he wrote, 'these reports through all of their collective chains are authentic without doubt (*Bilā Rayb*).

A student of mine read this book of Shaykh Albānī's in Mauritius, from a print published in Lebanon. When he was in Egypt he bought the same book but published in Saudi. When he checked the Laila Nisf Sha'bān Ahādīth they were all missing; (page 116 to 179). The Wahhābī propaganda machine simply deleted the Ahādīth which do not suit their doctrines.

¹⁴ p. 208. Haddad, G.F. (2005) *Sunna Notes- Studies in Hadīth & Doctrine* (Volume II; The Excellent Innovation in the Qur'ān and Hadīth. Aqsa Publications: UK.

¹⁵ Ibn al-Salāh Uthmān ibn 'Abd al-Rahmān. (1986) *Muqaddima ('Ulum al-Hadīth)*. Dār-al-Fikar: Beirut, Lebanon, p. 103.

Conclusion.

Owing to the numerous Ahādīth on the issue, it is almost impossible to argue that Laila Nisf 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 Shaykh Ibn Taymiyya, Ashraf Alī Thānvī and Moulāna Muhammad Taqī Uthmānī.

Admittedly, there is a difference of opinion regarding the worship related to this night, but this has been misinterpreted by some Muslims. For example, the Successor Al-Auzā'ī disliked the collective gathering in the mosque for Laila Nisf Sha'bān. Some people took this statement to mean he was against commemorating the night. This is not what he said. Instead, he believed that Muslims should perform their own prayers individually. Likewise, some Muslims have over-stressed the importance of the prayers on this night. The prayers on this night are *Nafis* and nothing more.

Muslims should take every opportunity to seek the forgiveness of Allāh Almighty. As the Ahādīth suggest, Laila Nisf Sha'bān is a gilt-edged chance for Muslims to turn to their Lord and ask from His benevolence and Mercy. It is unfortunate that some Muslims choose to display religious passiveness on this night, and attempt to encourage other Muslims to follow suit.

*In memory of Hafiz Muhammad Zia al-Mustafa, who died in June 2010, aged eighteen.
May Allah forgive his sins and grant him a place in Paradise. Ameen.*

Hafiz Ather Hussain al-Azhari.

*BA Principles of Theology, Al-Azhar University, Cairo:
MPhil Theology & BA Political Science, University of Birmingham:
MA Arabic & Islamic Studies, Bhera Sharif, Pakistan.*