

17 *Salat* — Contact Prayer

God gave us a beautiful gift in the Contact Prayer, or *Salat*. Known as the second pillar of Islam, I find it the best means of keeping God foremost in my thoughts and life.

Ever since I can remember prayer has been special for me. Probably my first truly spiritual experience occurred while I prayed at about the age of eight.

I grew up next to a wash. It was called a river but it only had water in it after a heavy summer storm or in the spring when the snows on the nearby mountains melted. Most of the time it seemed like a huge sand box for the neighborhood children to play in. When out of school, I practically lived in this wash. It became a special refuge for me, especially when something upset me.

On the day I am remembering something set me off. I do not remember what happened to upset me, but I do remember sitting in the warm sand sobbing my heart out, praying to God, and wishing I could be like the little lizard a few feet away—the only other breathing creature in sight. Suddenly a deep peace descended upon me and I felt God's healing presence engulf me.

I recognized that same feeling immediately when I began to do the Contact Prayers. It felt as if water flowed over my soul again after a long drought.

But the traditional understanding of a woman's ability to perform this most important practice provided a major issue of inequity for me.

The Contact prayer remains an obligatory practice, which every Muslim should perform within five specific periods of the day. Even in times of war when attack could be imminent, God commands Muslims to pray with precautions (4:102-103). He provides for situations when the prayer cannot be done in its normal manner; then it can be done while walking or riding (2:239). He makes the religion easy and wishes for us convenience not difficulty (5:6).

But my early teachers of Islam told me I could not perform the Contact Prayer while menstruating because I could not remain clean. Unhappily I accepted this indignity, not knowing what else to do. However this edict kept a friend of mine from becoming Muslim. She simply would not accept she could not pray during the time of the month when she needed it the most.

Like the situation discussed in Chapter 12 the problem here seems to lie with a misinterpretation of the Quranic verse forbidding intimate relations between spouses during the wife's menstrual period.

In vain I looked for verses in the Quran that told me not to pray. Instead I found verse after verse telling me just the opposite and making it clear I must pray regularly. For example:

*...Establish
Regular Prayer: for Prayer
Restrains from shameful*

*And unjust deeds;
And remembrance of God
Is the greatest (thing in life)....
(The Holy Quran XXIX:45 [29:45])*

Here God commands me to establish regular prayer. And I'm told the prayer restrains me from doing wrong. Don't I need this restraint while menstruating? More importantly, how regular would my prayer be if I did not pray for one week out of four?

The following verse describes believers as praying regularly:

*And they observe their Contact Prayers (Salat) regularly.
(Quran: The Final Testament 23:9)*

Perhaps one might argue this just applies to men. However, the following verse clarifies:

*The Believers, men / And women, are protectors, / One of another: ... they observe / Regular prayers....
(The Holy Quran IX:71 [9:71])*

Both men and women must pray regularly. This makes sense not only on an individual level for each woman's soul, but also in the society. Since the mother almost always takes care of the very young and most impressionable children, her regular prayer gives a crucial modeling for future generations. It would be most confusing for young ones if sometimes she prayed and sometimes she did not.

Then I found the following series of verses. To me they make it clear I should not follow the wishes of someone telling me not to pray.

*Have you seen the one who enjoins. Others from praying? Is it not better for him to follow the guidance? Or advocate righteousness?... You shall not obey him; you shall fall prostrate and draw nearer.
(Quran: The Final Testament 96:9-19)*

~: * :~

For those of you who are not familiar with the Contact Prayers, or *Salat* in Arabic, let me describe them.

God gave this practice originally to the prophet Abraham. I have already noted in Chapter 12 the similarity of the Salat motions with those of the Jewish prayer and the motions of a priest performing the mass. The Contact Prayers consist of five prayers said within specific time frames throughout the 24 hours of the day. The first becomes due during the dawn before the sun rises, the second a little after noon, the third later in the afternoon, the fourth after sunset before it becomes dark, and the fifth after dark. Sometimes Muslims combine prayers but the following verse shows they come due within these specific ranges of time.

*...When ye are free
From danger, set up
Regular Prayers:
For such prayers
Are enjoined on Believers
At stated times.
(The Holy Quran IV:103 [4:103])*

Thus the prayers should be done “*at stated times*” and not combined. For further evidence for this fact, we have the example set for us by the prophet Solomon in Verses 38:31-33. He missed his sunset prayer because he allowed his horses to absorb his attention. If he had been able to combine his sunset prayer with the night prayer, he would not have felt the need to give up his horses.

Each prayer consists of a set number of units: the dawn has two, the noon has four, the afternoon has four, the sunset has three, and the night has four.

Before I actually became Muslim, I began doing the Salat, though at the time I did not understand why we had to do the movements, which I will describe shortly. At that time they seemed to be a distraction, especially as I was trying to learn the Arabic words of the prayers and their meanings. However, after practicing these prayers for more than half my life I see how the movements actually help me keep my concentration rather than distracting me. They help keep the prayers from becoming just mindless rote words for me now. They also help my body stretch and move, keeping me more limber than I would be otherwise, and they help me keep my place within the units, or *rak’ahs*, because there is an alternating movement pattern in the *rak’ahs*.

Each *rak’ah* begins in the standing position with the recitation in Arabic of the short first chapter of the Quran (quoted below). Then you bow and repeat an Arabic phrase or one in your own language, which glorifies God. Then you go into prostration and again repeat another phrase glorifying God. If this is an odd-numbered unit you will stand up again (unless it is the sunset prayer when you will end with the Shahada after the third *rak’ah*). If it is an even-numbered unit you will repeat the Shahada, bearing witness that only God is God and He has no partners. As you move from position to position you say, “*Allahu Akbar*” or “*God is Great*”.

When you recite the first chapter of the Quran, you repeat God’s own words as He revealed them. You don’t recite a translation or an interpretation but God’s actual words. I’ve also heard the actual sounds of the Arabic act as a combination to open the contact with God, like the combination of a safe. What a gift from God.

The English translation of that first chapter of the Quran follows. Muslims know it variously as the Opener or the Key, or *Al-Fatehah* in Arabic:

*In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Praise be to God, Lord of the universe. Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Master of the Day of Judgment. You alone we worship; You alone we ask for help. Guide us in the right path; the path of those whom You blessed; not of those who have deserved wrath, nor of the strayers.
(Quran: The Final Testament 1:1-7)*

Most Muslims recite other portions of the Quran besides the first chapter in some of their units. I am not comfortable doing so because to me the Contact Prayer creates a direct contact with my Creator. I feel like I am addressing Him directly. Since most of the Quran relates to humans, not to God, it doesn't feel right to address Him and then recite something totally disconnected, like a verse about Moses and Pharaoh.

The Contact Prayers came to us through Abraham, long before the revelation of the Quran. So adding additional verses after the Al-Fatehah does not follow the prayer as it came to us through God's friend Abraham. Also, recitation of any verses that address anyone other than God breaks the commandment in the following verse:

The places of worship belong to God; do not call on anyone else beside God.
(Quran: The Final Testament 72:18)

So in the Contact Prayer we do not want to recite any verses that address anyone other than our Creator.

In the sitting position many Muslims pray for the families of Muhammad and Abraham. However this practice feels like adding the name of Muhammad to the Shahada, as mentioned in the last chapter. It makes a distinction among God's messengers, which God tells us not to do. Besides, we know from the following verse, our prayers will not help them:

... No soul benefits except from its own works, and none bears the burden of another....
(Quran: The Final Testament 6:164)

Not only will our prayer not help them but praying for the families of Muhammad and Abraham means you pray for Abraham's father who threatened to kill him and Muhammad's uncle Abee Lahab who led the opposition against the early Muslims. For Muslims this becomes an issue because at the time of revelation God told Muslims not to pray at the grave of those who would not fight in God's cause (see 9:83-4). Thus it only makes sense not to pray for the dead who fought *against* God's cause.

Before beginning the prayer you perform a symbolic ablution: washing your face, arms to the elbows, wiping your head and washing your feet to the ankles. (See 5:6.) If you cannot find water or you are ill you can perform the dry ablution as described in the following:

O you who believe, do not observe the Contact Prayers (Salat) while intoxicated, so that you know what you are saying. Nor after sexual orgasm without bathing, unless you are on the road, traveling; if you are ill or traveling, or you had urinary or fecal-related excretion (such as gas), or contacted the women (sexually) and you cannot find water, you shall observe Tayammum (dry ablution) by touching clean dry soil, then wiping your faces and hands therewith....
(Quran: The Final Testament 4:43)

The only place God gives a condition for not praying appears in the first part of the above verse—intoxication. However God provides Verses 2:219 and 5:90, which essentially forbid the use of intoxicants.

Please notice 4:43 also describes what things nullify the ritual purity needed for prayer. And it indicates those who feel ill should still pray but they can do the dry ablution rather than washing.

This verse thus answers the final argument given to me for why I could not pray during my period. People told me my period resembled an illness and God made it easy for me by allowing me to skip my prayer. However 4:43 indicates I should pray even if I am ill.

I find nothing in the whole Quran indicating I should not pray during my period. On the contrary, I find many verses telling me to pray regularly. Also the above verses show we should pray when ill, if we are afraid of attack during times of war, even if we must do it while walking or riding. I never see any reason not to do my Contact Prayers.

~: * :~

The congregational prayer on Fridays—known as the *Salat Al-Jumu'ah*, or just *Jumu'ah*, or the Friday Prayer—provides another issue for women. In many parts of the Muslim world mosques do not welcome women, so they do not attend the Friday congregational prayer. A large portion of my friends had never gone to the Friday Prayer even though they were born and raised as Muslim women.

However the following verse commands *all* believers to participate in this weekly event:

O ye who believe!
When the call is proclaimed
To prayer on Friday
(The Day of Assembly),
Hasten earnestly to the Remembrance
Of God,...
(The Holy Quran LXII:9 [62:9])

All believers, not just men, should follow this commandment to “*Hasten earnestly to the Remembrance of God*”.

In our community, the Friday Prayer has become a wonderful time. It provides the one time in the week that the entire community comes together. The brothers leading the services keep them short so those who must go back to work do not have to take much if any extra time for their lunch break. But those who have the time stay after the prayer to visit a bit.

A different brother leads the prayer each week, giving two short talks known as *khutbahs*. These talks elaborate on Quranic topics or topics of community concern with examples from the Quran. The *khutbahs* substitute for two of the units of the noon *Salat* (Contact Prayer). Between the talks, we turn to God in silent repentance. After the second talk, the brother leads two units of *Salat*.

If you practice Islam and find yourself alone or in a place that does not have a community where you feel comfortable joining for the Jumu'ah prayer please consider starting one yourself. All you need is one other person to follow this important commandment of God. You can rotate giving the khutbahs, just reading from the Quran to each other if nothing else. Who knows, you may find a community growing. Many of my friends have found just that.

In our community, we get together again on Friday evenings for a Quran study led by one of the sisters. Of course, anyone can lead a Quran study. We just chose to give the sisters a chance on Friday nights to lead the study in rotation, like the brothers who do the khutbahs in rotation at noon for the Friday Prayer.

Most people come for both the Friday Prayer and the Quran study so Friday becomes a wonderful community day for us all.¹

~: * :~ ~: * :~ ~: * :~

The following story tells of the birth of a community. Though Patty and her husband began the Friday Prayers with just the two of them and a few others it did not take long before I attended a Friday Prayer in their home, which barely had room for us all to do the prayer.

Once You Start

About 12 years ago, my brother introduced to us the mathematical miracle of the Quran. When my husband and I examined the mathematical miracle of the Quran, it was so awesome and showed us without a doubt that the Quran must be the word of God.² We began to read the Quran's translation to see what was really written in this book. Certainly we didn't find any of the cruel and inhumane rules that some governments were enforcing as Islamic Law in the Quran. What we found instead was guidance, light, encouragement and a religion and philosophy that promoted only peace and love. I also found the answer to a question that I had for a long time, "If there is only one God then why are there so many religions?" I realized that all of the monotheist religions are the same and God commanded the Prophet Mohammed to follow the religion of Abraham. I also learned that God commands us not to accept any information unless we as individuals verify it. This is so crucial to our daily lives. Many crimes, punishments and killings in the name of religion could have been stopped if people would have verified the information they were hearing.

My husband and I were completely overwhelmed by what we read in the Quran. We realized for ourselves that what was being practiced in many Muslim countries and

¹ *Editorial note:* For additional information on the Contact Prayers and their origin please see *Direct Contact* by Ihsan Ramadan with Lisa Spray, BSM Press, 2002.

² *Editorial note:* Please see Chapter 21 and Appendix 2 for more information on the mathematical encoding of the Quran.

communities is not even similar to the teachings that are given in the Quran. When we first really learned about the Quran, we had the Quran with us everywhere we went. When one of us was driving, the other was reading the Quran out loud. We were so excited that we wanted to do our religious obligations as soon as possible. We started praying 5 times a day and giving our *Zakat* [obligatory charity]. We also learned from the Quran that we had to do our Friday group prayers at noon. We would try to go to the mosque in another town to do our group prayers whenever we could. However, some Fridays we could not make it and we were very sad. Fortunately we found out that as long as there are as few as two people, one giving the *Khotbeh* [*khutbah*], and one listening, the Friday Prayer can be observed.

Locally, my husband and I started doing the Friday Prayers with two friends and a co-worker instead of driving all the way to the other town. Soon, our group grew and we had the Friday Prayers in our house. Even at night we would have Quranic studies, where anyone interested in learning about the Quran could gather, read, and discuss verses from the Quran with others. Today, I always look forward to Fridays so I can learn more and more about God's commandments and how to apply them to my daily life.

—Patty, Iran & U.S.A.

~: * :~

Others besides me have not been sure they could do all the Salat prayers. Sister G felt the same way and she shares that here.

Salat - Contact Prayers

Pray five times a day! Every day! For the rest of my life?! No way, not me. I'm a modern woman. You can't make me subscribe to something like that!

I did have those thoughts. It seemed overwhelming. Sure, I believe in God, as Creator and Sustainer. But five times every day? I just can't do it.

I laugh at myself now for those thoughts. Now, I truly know. I don't *have* to do five prayers a day. I *get* to do five prayers a day. It's a gift, a blessing. More than anything else, it pulls me away from the nonsense of my day-to-day life and redirects me to the most important thing in life—God.

All of my fears about such a big commitment, gone. My nervousness about the bowing and prostrating, nothing to worry about. God made it so easy for me. Some people wade in gradually—doing two or three prayers a day until they can establish the habit. And that's fine. But I just plunged right in, and I was immediately so thankful.

Yes, I will occasionally forget a prayer. I'll suddenly look at the clock and realize the time has passed, the sun has set, the afternoon is gone—along with my opportunity to communicate with God. I always feel terrible, like I've wasted a precious chance. Then I ask God to forgive me and help me do better. And I thoroughly enjoy the next prayer.

It's not a burden; it's a blessing. It's not to be feared; it's to be embraced. Salat means the Contact Prayers—making contact with the One God who created all. What a gift.

—G, U.S.A.

~: * :~ ~: * :~ ~: * :~

Like most things that I do all the time, I sometimes do the Contact Prayers without full concentration. Once I realize what I am doing I feel awful. Here I am standing in the presence of my Creator and I am thinking about some email I have to write or what I food to feed my husband. How disrespectful and unappreciative I feel, especially given all the blessings He has showered me with!

Thankfully those periods pass and I am able to concentrate again. It seems to me that perhaps we get this kind of disturbance in our practices to help us learn to persevere. God tells us many times that being steadfast and persevering helps define the believers, as these two examples show:

As for those who steadfastly persevere, and lead a righteous life, they deserve forgiveness and a generous recompense.
(*Quran: The Final Testament 11:11*)

What you possess runs out, but what God possesses lasts forever. We will surely reward those who steadfastly persevere; we will recompense them for their righteous works.
(*Quran: The Final Testament 16:96*)

So if you find yourself getting distracted at times when you pray, whether you are Muslim or not, do not be too harsh with yourself. You are not alone with this problem. Many of us suffer from it. But more importantly, God always stands ready to help, if we just remember to ask for His help.