



Tahajjud: Fuel for the Self and Society

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Damascus is a beautiful city. Jasmine vines and bright purple bougainvillea flowers grow on balconies all over the city and jacaranda trees sneak up in the small spaces between blocks and buildings. I used to live in a twelve-story cement block building that stood in a row of at least ten other buildings almost exactly like it. At *maghrib* time, the sun would go down and the buildings' windows would light up with crystal chandeliers and fluorescent lights. People would go about the evening work of children's homework, supper, and soap operas all up and down the floors. It was a beautiful sight to see these buildings' eyes open and fluttering with life. Then, as the evening waned, the buildings would grow dark with sleep.

About an hour before *fajr*, my light, and my neighbor's light would turn back on. I could see her window across the little garden that separated our buildings. And I would look at the other darkened windows, closed eyes, and grow sad for the Muslim *ummah*. I often thought on these nights of the saying of Ka'b al-Aḥbār who said, "The angels look down from heaven upon those who pray *tahajjud* as you look at the stars of the sky,"¹ and thought how very dark the earth must look to the angels.

Light of the earth

Time and again, God calls on Muslims to be of those who invite to goodness and push back against what is ugly and evil. "You are the best community that has been raised up for humanity: You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, and you believe in Allah..."² and "Those who repent, who worship, who praise, who fast, who bow down, who prostrate, who enjoin good and forbid evil, and who observe the limits set by Allah"³ and "The believing men and women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and establish prayer and give *zakāh* and obey Allah and His Messenger,"⁴ for example, all call upon us

¹ Ibn Rajab, *Majmū' Rasā'il al-Ḥāfiẓ ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī*, v. 4, p. 51, <https://ia800706.us.archive.org/34/items/FP63449/mrir4.pdf>.

² Qur'an 3:110.

³ Qur'an 9:112.

⁴ Qur'an 9:71.

to take on the enormous task of being light cast upon the earth. The job of setting a standard and actively working to make the world a better place is not easy. It is hard work. Like the work of a gardener who plants flowers and vegetables and then spends weeks and months weeding, hoeing, pruning, and all sorts of other things in order to harvest, this work needs strength.

The strength to build, uplift, and make positive change must come from somewhere. It is tiring work and often thankless. It is not work fueled by anger. It is slow and patient work. It needs a fuel that is an unlimited resource and one that does not burn, but rather grows. Like solar energy, the fuel of positive cultural change needs to be warming and energizing, but gentle and healthy. This fuel is worship, and especially, *tahajjud*.

Tahajjud defined

The prayer at night is termed in Arabic either *qiyām al-layl* (standing at night) or, if occurring after any amount of sleep, *tahajjud*, and is the most important prayer after the *farḍ* (obligatory) prayers. This is based on the Prophet's ﷺ clear words, “The best prayer one can perform apart from the obligatory prayers is one performed at night.”⁵ He ﷺ emphasized its importance when he said, “Every believer should pray at night, even if only as long as it would take to milk an ewe, and what is after the ‘*ishā*’ prayer is of the night.”⁶ Milking an ewe generally takes anywhere between one and five minutes for an experienced milker.⁷

The prayer consists of any number of *rak‘ahs* that can be long or short in their recitation and movements. They can be done in a group or alone. The words *tahajjud* and *qiyām* are often used interchangeably, but *tahajjud* specifically refers to a prayer that is prayed after rising from sleep and *qiyām al-layl* means to stand at night regardless of whether one has slept or not yet.

⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1993.

⁶ Zakī al-Dīn ‘Abd al-‘Azīm ibn ‘Abd al-Qawī al-Mundhir, *al-Targhīb wa-al-Tarhīb min al-hadīth al-sharīf* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, 2002), 1:962, https://ia800508.us.archive.org/35/items/FP153161/01_153161.pdf.

⁷ Jema, “How to Milk a Sheep 101: 12 Steps to Sheep Milking Success,” Half the Clothes, <https://halftheclothes.com/how-to-milk-a-sheep-101-12-steps-to-sheep-milking-success/>.

Tahajjud effects

Social status

The Qur'an draws a connection between *tahajjud* and great accomplishments. Allah (swt) says to the Prophet ﷺ, “And rise from sleep during the night as well—this is an additional prayer for you. Perhaps your Lord will raise you to an honored position.”⁸ Here the translation struggles to convey the image of movement at night. The Arabic draws a clear visual of one rising from bed to prayer. The verse then connects our status—whether earthly or heavenly—to our ability to wake and pray at night. The Muslim *ummah* today is suffering under the weight of Islamophobia, stereotypes, and cultural challenges that place our worldly status on a low rung. We need to pray *tahajjud* for our own spiritual status and for the social and political status of our *ummah*. We need to seek “an honored position.” Our spiritual status is so dependent on *tahajjud* that early ‘*ulamā*’ would say that a person becomes a friend of God only in relationship to their *tahajjud*—or their night prayers, meaning night prayers are required to attain this status.

The ability to carry great responsibility

In the very beginning of the revelation, Allah (swt) revealed to our Beloved Prophet ﷺ the famous verses, “O you wrapped in a garment! Arise (to pray) the night, except for a little—half of it—or subtract from it a little—or add to it and recite the Qur'an with measured recitation.”⁹ Here the Prophet ﷺ is called upon to spend more of his night in prayer than in sleep because he is about to receive weighty words. Those weighty words are the Glorious Qur'an—words we need to use in praying at night in order to truly taste them and enjoy them.

The companions would also follow the instructions in this verse until the final verse of the same chapter was revealed, “Indeed, your Lord knows, that you stand

⁸ Qur'an 17:79.

⁹ Qur'an 73:1–4.

almost two-thirds of the night or half of it or a third of it, and (so do) a group of those with you. And Allah determines the night and the day. He has known that you will not be able to do it and has turned to you in forgiveness, so recite what is easy for you of the Qur'an..."¹⁰ The verse goes on to recognize that sometimes we may be sick or traveling or involved in war and so Allah makes easier for us the injunction to spend most of the night in prayer. We are still encouraged to pray as much of the night as we can but the call to this prayer became more flexible in this last verse.

Become the best of people

In Surat al Furqan Allah (swt) describes the "Servants of the Merciful" as those who "walk gently on the earth" and those who "when the ignorant address them they respond with peace."¹¹ These qualities are difficult to manifest in ourselves. How do we respond when a flight attendant is rude to us? Or the hundredth person who asks us, while wearing hijab in the dead of summer, "Aren't you hot?" A couple of years ago, I was at the Minnesota State Fair sitting on a plastic chair attending an event in support of my sister. She spotted me in the audience and said (into the microphone) "Hi sister!" The woman sitting next to me gave me a long look and blurted out, "Sister?" I smiled and said, "Yes, we are sisters." She said, "But...how? Look at you. How?" She was struggling to express her shock and—if I am honest—disgust. I had some background about this particular woman, and I knew that she was deeply racist, and I became slightly nervous as I looked around to be sure that I was safe. I took a deep breath and grounded myself in being a servant of the Merciful and responded gently saying, "Yes, we are sisters. We were raised Lutheran. She is still a Lutheran, but I became a Muslim many years ago. We love each other and we are still sisters even though we are different religions." I didn't convert anyone to love and acceptance on that day but I also did not give her any fuel to complain about the manners of Muslims. The ability to answer out of our comfort zones comes from nightly prayers that calm the heart and make us the people we are supposed to be. God says in the next verse, after admonishing us

¹⁰ Qur'an 73:20.

¹¹ Qur'an 25:63.

to be good and kind even to the ignorant and still describing the servants of the Merciful as “those who spend the night in worship of their Lord, prostrate and standing.”¹² The phrasing of this verse gives me pause every time I read it. Though we pray by standing first and then prostrating, here the verse begins with the prostration. It gives me the feeling of drawing strength from long prostrations so that we can stand strong with the good qualities that Allah (swt) calls upon us to carry forth into the world as His servants.

In Sūrat al-Insān, God again calls on us to prostrate and praise God for a long period of time at night: “And during the night, prostrate yourself to Him; and glorify Him a long (part of the) night.”¹³ This verse falls after an exhortation of patience and steadfastness in the work of the guidance of humanity. Here the term “glorify Him” refers to praying *tahajjud*—to glorify Allah in the long hours of the night.

These three verses, along with numerous others in the Qur’an, connect standing in nightly prayers with the power and strength needed to do the work of prophethood and, by default, the work of the inheritors of the Prophet ﷺ—the work of real change and guidance for humanity.

The Prophetic practice

The Prophet ﷺ, whose very character was the Qur’an, would pray at night for long hours. Ḥudhayfah (ra), tells us his personal experience with the intensity of the beloved Prophet’s prayer, “I prayed with the Prophet ﷺ one night and he began with al-Baqarah, and I said to myself, ‘He will do *rukū’* after one hundred verses, but he continued,’ Then I said to myself, ‘He will pray this *rak‘ah* with it (the *sūrah*).’ But then he began al-Nisā’ and read it, and then he began Āl ‘Imrān and read it, too. He read slowly, and if he came upon a verse of praise, he praised, and if he came upon a (verse calling on us to) request, he would request (from Allah), and if he came upon a point of seeking refuge, he sought refuge, then he

¹² Qur’an 25:64.

¹³ Qur’an 76:26.

bowed in *rukū* ‘ and began to say ‘*subhān Allāh al-‘aẓīm*’; and his *rukū* ‘ was as his standing. Then he said ‘*sami‘a Allāhu li-man ḥamidah rabbanā laka al-ḥamd*’ and then stood as his *rukū* ‘, he then went into *sujūd* and said ‘*subhāna rabbī al-‘alā*’ and his *sujūd* was as his standing.”¹⁴ When we read this account of the Prophet’s ﷺ prayer, we have a better understanding of ‘Ā’ishah’s (ra) words, “The Prophet ﷺ would stand at night until his feet swelled.”¹⁵ The prayer described by Hudhaifa opens a window into a *tahajjud* prayer that few of us could even hope to aspire to. On that night, he ﷺ recited a little over six sections, or 105 pages, in his ﷺ first *rak‘ah* of prayer.

On the night before Badr, when the nascent Muslim community was facing possible annihilation, the Prophet ﷺ spent the entire night in prayer. ‘Alī (r) said, “Every single one of us slept except for the Messenger of Allah who, under a tree, was praying and weeping until morning...”¹⁶ He sought strength and help in his *tahajjud* and Allah (swt) sent thousands of angels to the battlefield to help them.

The prayer of the companions

The companions also spent their nights in prayer. Sometimes we can see the direct connection between a night of prayer and a day of success, like at Badr, and other times we see a lifetime of worship and miraculous cultural change as a result. Bilal, for example, was a man who prayed *tahajjud*. It is said that while he waited for the light of *fajr* to come in so that he could call the *adhān*, he would pray and ask Allah to guide Quraish. A woman of Banī Najjār said, “By God, I have never known him to miss this supplication even once.”¹⁷ Bilāl was abused by Quraysh and they were not his tribe or his relatives. Yet the light of Islam and the love of the Prophet ﷺ gave him the heart to pray for, and not against, the Quraysh. His hope for their guidance was certainly his hope for the heart of the Messenger to be

¹⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 772.

¹⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* 8:449; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2819.

¹⁶ *Musnad Aḥmad*, 2:44, no. 1023, graded authentic by Shaykh Aḥmad Shākir.

¹⁷ Asma Tabaa, *Nujūm fī falak al-nubuwwah* [Stars in the Prophet’s Orbit] (Damascus: Dār al-Salām, 2004), 83.

pleased. But how many of us would have a heart large enough to contain and pray for a people who have harmed us? *Tahajjud* was one of the keys to that strength of heart.

Tamīm b. Aws was a convert from Christianity. He came to Medina in the ninth year after the *hijrah*. Tamim was a man of worship and would regularly read the entire Qur'an in seven nights and pray a long *tahajjud* that included long hours of *du'ā*. We understand his commitment to his night prayers when, on one occasion, he slept through the night and missed *tahajjud*, and then, as a way of repentance and recommitment, he prayed all night every night for an entire year. This man, with his commitment to *tahajjud*, had insight and vision. He was the first to light up the *masjid* with lanterns and oil, which he did on his own. Imagine the pleasure and surprise when, after setting up the lanterns during the day, he lit them at night! The Prophet ﷺ said, “You have lit up Islam. May Allah enlighten you in this world and in the hereafter. If I had a daughter, I would have presented her to you in marriage.”¹⁸ We see that *tahajjud* gave him creativity and initiative to do good deeds as well as a character that had the potential to earn him the status of son-in-law to the Prophet ﷺ, a status granted sparingly and only to those with the best qualities.

Another companion whose *tahajjud* is memorable and a lesson for us was Usaïd ibn Hudair. His recitation at night was so beautiful that the angels would descend to listen. On one memorable night, it is said that he rose to pray and began reciting from Surat al-Baqara and his horse began acting spooked, so he stopped. His horse calmed down and he started again. The horse started acting spooked again and Usaïd looked up and saw a sky like he had never seen before that seemed to be lit with lamps. He told the Prophet ﷺ about his experience and he said, “Those were angels who came near to you for your voice and if you had kept on reciting till dawn, it would have remained there till morning when people would have seen it as it would not have disappeared.”¹⁹ Usaïd (r) taught us that spiritual states are

¹⁸ al-Imām al-Ḥāfiẓ Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī ibn Ḥajr al-‘Asqlānī, *al-Iṣābah fī tamyīz al-ṣaḥābah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, 1995), 488.

¹⁹ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5018.

the fuel we need for a lifetime of cultural change. His worship gave him a pleasant character and he was known to be lighthearted and easygoing. He was also devoted and strong, participating in battles and contributing to the political strength of the nascent community.

Umm Waraqah (ra) was also known for her long nights in prayer²⁰ and her moving Qur’anic recitation. It is said that ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb would pause at her house on his nightly walks through the city and listen to her recitation.²¹ al-Shifā’ also was known for her worship at night. On one occasion ‘Umar al-Khaṭṭāb visited al-Shifā’, and she narrates the story, “‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb entered my home and saw two men sleeping, my husband and son. He asked, ‘What is the matter with these two men who did not pray with us?’ I replied, ‘O Amīr al-Mu’minīn, they prayed with the people and they continued to pray until it became morning. Then they prayed the morning prayer and went to sleep.’” Umar was upset they had not attended *fajr* at the mosque, but I recognize in this narration that the entire family had spent the night in prayer.²² Anas ibn Mālīk reports that the Prophet ﷺ once came into the mosque and saw a rope tied between two pillars. Upon inquiring why it was there he was told, “It is for Zaynab. When she feels drowsy. She holds on to it.”²³ The hadith goes on to advise us all in how to manage sleepy prayers, but the point is not lost on those wondering about the commitment to prayer of the early Muslims. Zaynab was praying so much and to such a degree that she had made herself something to hold on to in case she felt she might fall from exhaustion. What kind of devotion to *tahajjud* was this? This was the early community of women and men. They were people of *tahajjud*. And as a result they changed the face of the earth as our first and best community.

The habit of *tahajjud* stays alive

²⁰ Tabaa, *Stars in the Prophet’s Orbit*.

²¹ Tabaa.

²² Tabaa, 147.

²³ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 212.

The habit of *tahajjud* continued in the lives of the *tābi ‘īn* (those who came after the companions—the followers), our later *‘ulamā’* (scholars) and *awliyā’* (people of God). Imām Abū Ḥanīfah was nicknamed “the Pillar” because he spent so much time standing in prayer. He was also known to pray the *fajr* prayer with the same *wuḍū’* that he had prayed the *‘ishā’* prayer with (meaning he was in constant prayer all night).²⁴ Imām al-Shāfi‘ī would devote one third of the night to sleep, one third to study, and one third to prayer.²⁵ And Imām al-Bukhārī is said to have prayed thirty (long) *rak‘ahs* during the last part of the night.²⁶

When we read about the stories of early people, we are rarely let into their personal struggles, and could mistakenly think that they reached such levels of spirituality and commitment with ease. Thābit al-Bunānī, however, gave us a glimpse into his own personal struggle when he said, “I struggled against my self for *qiyām al-layl* for twenty years, and then I savored it for twenty.”²⁷ Twenty years! How many of us would have given up after only a few months? Or weeks? If *tahajjud* feels to you like nothing but a struggle to stay awake, take comfort in knowing that persistence will bring you a sweet reward.

For some, the heart yearned for *tahajjud* from an early age. Sahl ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustarī began praying *tahajjud* when he was three years old at the encouragement of his uncle. Abū Yazīd al-Buṣṭāmī was a young child when he woke and saw his father praying. He asked him to teach him how to wash and pray with him, and his father said, “But you are still young,” to which he responded, “When the day of judgment comes, I will say I asked you to teach me but you refused.” So, his father taught him, and he began a lifelong habit of *tahajjud*.²⁸

The real blessing of *qiyām al-layl* is seen in the response of Junayd when he was seen in a dream after his death and asked, “What did your Lord do with you?” He replied, “The signs and expressions and metaphors and knowledge which we once

²⁴ Gibril Fouad Haddad, *The Four Imams and Their Schools* (London: Muslim Academic Trust, 2007).

²⁵ Hajjah Durriah al-Aytah, *Fiqh al Ibadat According to the Shafi’ School of Thought* (Damascus: Sabah, 1989).

²⁶ Al-Aytah.

²⁷ Maḥmūd al-Maṣrī, *Laylah fī bayt al-nabī* (Cairo: Maktaba Safa, 2011).

²⁸ Al-Masri, 73.

had all left and all that proved of value to us was the prayers we would pray before dawn.”²⁹

All of these leaders and builders of Muslim society were regular prayers of *tahajjud*. If we are, in our modern times, to take on the role of calling to what is right and good, and pushing back on what is ugly and evil, we must seek help from our night prayers.

Pandemic

The pandemic of the winter of 2020 has turned the world upside down. People of faith have been forced to see and practice their religious occasions (Easter, Passover, Ramadan) differently. Jobs have been lost, schools closed, stock markets tanked, and people across languages and cultures have been asked to stay at home. The stay-at-home orders have affected funerals and grieving, graduations and celebrating, and companies and working. The pandemic has stopped society as we know it and we are all standing at a precipice and holding our breath to see what it will look like post-covid.

Instead of waiting, however, we have an opportunity to fulfill our intended responsibility. We have the opportunity to promote goodness, light, and beauty. We can be part of an enormous cultural change that encourages all types of positivity.

There has been much speculation about how the world will be post-Covid19. History tells us that epidemics and pandemics do change society. The 1901 plague of Cape Town drove society into a segregated quarantine that was a precursor to the apartheid of 1948.³⁰ The end of the Spanish flu of 1918 coincided with the end of World War I so it is difficult to parse out the effects of the flu from the effects of the war. Kenneth Davis, in his 2018 book, *More Deadly than War: Hidden*

²⁹ al-Maṣrī, 74.

³⁰ Alexandre White, “Xenophobia in the Time of Quarantines,” Johns Hopkins Medicine: News and Publications, April, 10, 2020, <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/articles/xenophobia-in-the-time-of-quarantines>.

history of the Spanish Flu and the First World War, postulates that “After the twin horrors of world war and the Spanish Flu many Americans longed for a return to normalcy—a word used by President Warren G. Harding in his successful bid for presidency.”³¹ The desire for “normalcy” actually brought much change. The decade after the trauma of the flu and the war brought the roaring twenties, suffrage for women, and the temperance movement. In 1922, the Health section of the League of Nations was founded, the forerunner to the World Health Organization. Then the world fell back into war in 1939. Finally, in 1948, a flu vaccine was invented.³²

What will post-Covid19 society look like? What changes will be made and what role will Muslims have in this change? And can we be proactive about what will become the new normal?

As the early Muslims entered Medina, they found themselves sick with the local illness. Medina had been known for its plague and many Meccan companions contracted it. They were so sick they began to pray sitting and when the Prophet ﷺ saw them doing so, he said, “Know you that the prayer of one sitting is half the reward of one standing...”³³ And they struggled to their feet in hope of reward. During this time, ‘Ā’ishah (r) visited her father Abū Bakr, ‘Āmir ibn Fuhayrah and Bilāl, who were convalescing in one house, and she reported back that they were delirious in fever, reciting poetry about death and homesickness. The Prophet ﷺ prayed and asked Allah to remove the disease from Medina. He wanted them to love the city so that they could carry the message of Islam within and without. He said, “O God, make Medina beloved to us as You made Mecca beloved to us, or more so. O God, bless it for us in its weights and measures, and make it healthy for us, and transfer its plague to Mahya‘ah (a place far away).”³⁴

³¹ Kenneth C. Davis, *More Deadly than War: Hidden History of the Spanish Flu* (New York: Henry Holt, 2018), 208.

³² Laura Spinney, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How it Changed the World* (New York: Hachette, 2017).

³³ *Muwatta al-Imām Mālik*, bk. 8, hadith 309.

³⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6372.

The pandemic calls on us all to be our best selves. As Muslims, we must struggle to our feet in the depths of the night and call upon our Lord to remove the virus, and to help us all love each other, and the world that He has provided for us. We must light up the earth for the angels and for humanity.

Keystone habit

I am often asked “If I’m not even praying my five obligatory prayers, why are you encouraging me to pray *tahajjud*?” and—though it may seem counterintuitive—I do encourage us all to try and become of those who pray *tahajjud*, even if we are missing our *fard* prayers. *Tahajjud* is a keystone habit. “Keystone habits start a process that, over time, transforms everything.”³⁵ These habits are the ones that make transformational change in a whole life, or institution, even though they are just one habit. So, someone who has been dieting for a lifetime unsuccessfully might change her morning routine to include exercise and suddenly find herself losing weight. It is the habit that changed the other habits and created a healthier body.

Tahajjud is the habit that influences the rest of our day and how we focus our lives. If you are waking up for *tahajjud*, your chances of missing *fajr* are reduced, and if you have prayed *tahajjud* and *fajr*, you will push yourself to pray the other daily prayers in order to preserve the beauty of that day. As you get used to praying *tahajjud*, the strength of spirit, courage, faith, goodness and light will begin to well up within you and then *tahajjud* will become your dear friend.

Exhaustion

We live in a time when the prevailing global connection between people is exhaustion. Struggling to make ends meet, to raise children in the age of technology, and the impact of constant bad news has worn out our hearts and our

³⁵ Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit* (New York: Random House, 2014), 231.

bones. We see tweets and facebook posts about violence, injustice, racism, sexism, oppression, immorality, and seemingly every ugliness that could be imagined.

We also live in a time where we are told to sleep eight hours a night, to drink plenty of water, and to take our vitamins. We see images of supposedly rested people smiling on Instagram, laughing, and indulging in fun! Food! And perfect family poses! Then we ask ourselves why we can not get enough rest, why we are sleep deprived, and why we are cranky. We hope for a time in the “future” when we will have a perpetually tidy house, clean and peaceful babies, and smooth, well-hydrated skin.

It is time to examine our expectations of sleep as a source of energy. While there is no doubt that the human body needs sleep, there is also no doubt that the human soul needs fasting and praying in order to stay energized, healthy, and hopeful. The Prophet ﷺ, in an extraordinary response to ‘Ā’ishah’s question, “Do you sleep before observing *witr*?” said, “‘Ā’ishah, my eyes sleep, but my heart does not sleep.”³⁶ There is a lightness of sleep implied here. A heart that is awake even when the body is asleep.

Our modern sleep is often very heavy. Heavy with the weight of sins, darkness, and worldly desires that hold us in our bed past sunrise, and when we wake up, the body is still tired. When the soul *and* the body are exhausted, as they are for most people today, it can feel like no amount of rest will ever be enough.

Allah (swt) has prescribed Ramadan for His servants. This is a month of certain physical exhaustion—yet a month of healing and energy for the soul. God’s call to get up at night to pray *tahajjud* is similar. While at first we may find it difficult and feel sleep deprived during the day, soon the prayer will begin to strengthen our spirit and give us energy. We will stop wondering how the early companions accomplished so very much, and begin to accomplish more ourselves. We will stop struggling with inner conflict and begin spreading joy to the people around us with our increased patience and contentment.

³⁶ *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, no. 1341.

Allah (swt) describes the believers thus: “They arise from (their) beds; they supplicate their Lord in fear and aspiration, and from what We have provided them, they give.”³⁷

The habit of *tahajjud* is what fueled the first community and what we need to thrive in today’s world. *Tahajjud* is the rest we need.

How to struggle to your feet at night

In order to develop the habit of *tahajjud*, there are specific tips handed down to us by our early scholars as well as recommendations about the state of our inner selves as we strive to wake up our hearts and minds to the joy of *tahajjud*.

Tips and Tricks

1. Don’t overeat before bed. Many early *murshids* (guides for others on a path of spirituality) would stand at the dining table of their students and say, “Do not overeat! Drink up!” reminding their students that a heavy stomach produces a heavy body in bed. But a full bladder can get them out of bed to make *wuḍū’* at the right time of night. Wahb ibn Munabbih said, “There is nothing of the children of Ādam more beloved to Shayṭān than food and sleep.”³⁸
2. Don’t spend the day in that which overworks the nerves because this will cause heavier sleep. One of my teachers, Shaykhah Samira Zayid, said to me, “The work of the day determines the prayer at night” and she would encourage me to work hard, but to stay calm in the face of frustration or any little daily problem of *dunyá*. Losing my temper was exhausting. She gently encouraged me to be more empathetic and understanding of others so that I would have less of a struggle to wake up at night.

³⁷ Qur’an 32:16.

³⁸ Yūsuf Khaṭṭār Muḥammad, *Qiyām al-layl wa-asrārih* (Damascus: Nadr Publishing, 2001), 48.

3. Take a short nap during the day. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Support your fast in the day with food in the wee hours before *fajr*, and your prayers at night with a short nap in the day.”³⁹
4. Stay away from sin. A man said to Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, “O Abū Sa‘īd, I am healthy and I love to pray at night so why do I not wake up?” he answered, “Your sins stop you.” And Imām al-Thawrī said, “I was prevented from *qiyām al-layl* for five months because of a sin I committed.” He was asked, “What was that sin?” he said, “I saw a man crying and I criticized him to myself.”⁴⁰ In the beginning, when we are establishing the habit of *tahajjud*, it will be too early to say if a particular sin is blocking the prayer or not. But once you have developed a habit, and then suddenly find yourself struggling to wake up, it is a good time to ask yourself what is standing in your way.
5. Put into practice the *sunnah* aspects of sleep: to remember Allah before you sleep, sleep on your right side, etc.

Inner strength to wake up

There are three inner aspects of the heart that affect our ability to jump out of bed and onto the prayer carpet.

1. To have a healthy heart: a heart full of grudges, bitterness, and envy will struggle to wake up for prayers. These feelings are the whispers of Shayṭān. Try to replace them with forgiveness, love, and gratefulness and you will find yourself lighter in your bed at night.
2. To know the great status of the *tahajjud* prayer: We have all developed systems for finding the things in life that are the most efficient for success and in this case, the Prophet ﷺ gave us the system of *tahajjud*. He said, “Upon you is the prayer at night for it was the practice of the righteous before you, it is nearness to your Lord, a forgiveness of sin, and a protection from error.”⁴¹

³⁹ *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, no. 540.

⁴⁰ Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī al-Zubaydī, *Ithāf al-sādah al-muttaqīn bi-sharḥ iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Mu’asa al-Tarikh al-‘Arabi, n.d.), 5:537, <https://ia801302.us.archive.org/28/items/FP78871/ithafsm05.pdf>.

⁴¹ *Jāmi’ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 3549; *al-Mustadrak*, vol. 1, no. 308.

3. To have the love of God and *iman* in your heart, so that you are rising to meet your Beloved and converse intimately and beautifully as you stand in prayer. Imām al-Ghazālī, giving advice to his student, said, “Sufyān al-Thawrī (the mercy of God the Exalted be upon him) said, “At the start of the night a crier calls from beneath the Throne, ‘Let the worshippers get up!’ So they get up and they pray as God wills. Then a crier calls at midnight, ‘Let those who stand at length in prayer get up!’ So they get up and they pray until before daybreak. And when it is before daybreak, a crier calls, ‘Let those seeking forgiveness get up!’ So, they get up and seek forgiveness. And when the dawn breaks a crier calls, ‘Let the heedless get up!’ So they get out of their beds like the dead rising from their graves.”⁴² Imām al-Ghazālī was encouraging, or actually warning, his student to pay attention to *tahajjud*. He was scoffing at knowledge that was not backed up with deep and long nightly prayers. In this text, “A Letter to a Disciple,” al-Ghazālī lays it on the line—if this young man wants to be successful, he must be a person of worship, and *tahajjud* was the first and most important step. This advice should be taken to our own hearts so that we can become as the poet described, “He who has a perceiving heart will have only ‘Allah,’ ‘Allah’ spring to his lips.”⁴³

What to pray when you wake up

Tahajjud prayer is not specific. ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar said, “A man asked, ‘O Messenger of God, How is the prayer at night (performed)?’ He answered, ‘Two and then two and when you apprehend the approach of dawn, pray one *rak‘ah* as *witr*.’”⁴⁴

We can pray as many or as few sets of two *rak‘ahs* as we please. They can be a few long *rak‘ahs*, two short ones, or many short ones. Books of *fiqh* remind us to

⁴² Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Al-Ghazali Letter to a Disciple/Ayyuha'l-Walad: Bilingual English-Arabic Edition*, trans. and introduced with notes by Tobias Mayer (UK: Islamic Texts Society, 2005), 20.

⁴³ Mohammad Zia Ullah, *Islamic Concept of God* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 31.

⁴⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 1137.

plead with Allah at night and encourage us to pray the prayer of need during this very special time of night. But the entire night lies open for us to pray as little or as much as we need.

Starting out this new habit with two *rak'ahs* of *tahajjud* is a manageable keystone habit. It means waking only about 15 minutes before *fajr* in order to wash and pray in time before the *adhān*. Just this small change will begin to change us individually and as a community.

Ramadan is the perfect time to practice

The month of Ramadan is the month of spiritual growth. Allah (swt) says, “Oh you who believed, decreed upon you is fasting as it was decreed upon those before you that you may attain *taqwá*.”⁴⁵ Sayyid Quṭb says the phrase “Have *taqwá* of God as is His right to *taqwá*”⁴⁶ means there is no limit to the *taqwá* a person can achieve. Let the heart constantly strive to reach that state for as the heart itself is absorbed in the pursuit of this *taqwá* it will discover new horizons and experience new longings. And the closer it gets through its *taqwá* of God, the more this longing awakens to a higher station or rank, higher than where it was previously, and to a rank beyond where it was already elevated, and it looks forward to the station in which he/she awakens and thereafter never sleeps.”⁴⁷ *Taqwá*, then, is a process. It takes work to grow. Every Ramadan we fast, pray *taraweeh*, read Qur'an, give in charity, and hope to grow our *taqwá* and our closeness to Allah (swt). The Prophet ﷺ encouraged us to pray *qiyām al-layl* or *tahajjud* in Ramadan as well when he ﷺ said, “Whoever spends its nights in prayer out of faith and in the hope of reward, he will be forgiven his previous sins.”⁴⁸ And he ﷺ explicitly connected *taqwá* to the forgiveness of sins, “He is the One deserving of *taqwá*, and He is the One Who forgives. Allah, Blessed is He and Most High, said, ‘I am the most

⁴⁵ Qur'an 2:183.

⁴⁶ Qur'an 3:102.

⁴⁷ Sayyid Quṭb, *Tafsīr fī zilāl al-Qur'ān* (Egypt: Dār al-Shurūq, 1972), 442.

⁴⁸ *Sunan al-Nasa'i*, no. 2191.

worthy of *taqwá*, so whoever has *taqwá* of Me, not having any god besides Me, then I am [the One] Who can and will forgive him.”

The path, then, to success has been laid out in front of us. An increase in *taqwá* is an increase in forgiveness, and praying at night in Ramadan brings us to the place of forgiveness of sins, therefore increasing our *taqwá*.

In Ramadan we are already getting up to eat *suhūr*, so we have a golden opportunity to create and carve out this new habit. Pray while the coffee is brewing, while the tea is steeping, while the dishes are drying. Pray after you have stopped eating and you are waiting for *fajr* to come in—slip in two *rak‘ahs* and a special *du‘ā’*. You prayed *tarāwīḥ* in the beginning of the night, now pray *tahajjud* in the end of the night and ask Allah to make it a habit for your family. Children will see you praying while they sleepily eat their late night *suhūr*, and you will be building solid memories of prayer in their minds and hearts. Let this Ramadan be the beginning of an *ummah*-wide movement toward becoming people of *tahajjud*. Then we will be ready, when the pandemic crisis wanes, to lead the world in all that needs to be done. We will have the strength and vision we need from our new habit of *tahajjud*.

Intentional positive change

Today I live in a suburb of St. Paul, Minnesota. Here the thick trees and ample space between homes makes it impossible to look and wonder at the nighttime praying habits of my neighbors. But I can see the stars. And on those nights that I poke my head out of the window and look up, I pray that this *ummah* will once again be like this beautiful night sky to the angels. I pray that every Muslim home will be a place of the burning warmth and light of *tahajjud* and that we will take that newfound energy and go forth sprinkling goodness and uplifting action on every corner of the earth.

When we start to pray at night, our homes will begin to light up for the angels and our hearts and minds will light up for humanity. We can become the community that was brought forth to do every good thing and to prevent every ugly thing. We can fulfill our responsibility to the world when we have the strength we need from our late night/early morning prayers. We can become of the people of *tahajjud* in imitation of the Prophet ﷺ, his companions, those who followed them, our great scholars, and every Muslim, known and unknown, who has made a long-term positive change in society.