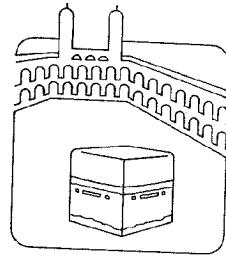


## ISLAMIC PRAYER

By Rami Yelda

There are now more than one billion three hundred million Moslems in the world. Most Moslems are faithful to their creed and one of the requirements of their creed is the mandatory daily offering of their supplication to their Creator. These days, on TV newscasts or in newspapers, one often sees images of Moslems praying in mosques, mosque yards, in streets or in private. What are the rules and rituals of prayers in Islam? This column is to acquaint the non-Moslem with the basic principles of Islamic prayer.



*Islam* means submission [to the will of God] in Arabic. As a religion, Islam has five pillars or foundations. These are: 1) Confession of faith. 2) Reciting five daily prayers. 3) Giving alms. 4) Fasting in the month of Ramathan (Ramazan in Persian). 5) Making a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Of the five pillars, the most important is the first - the *Shahada*. It is *always* recited in Arabic and says: I testify that there is no god but Allah and He is one and Mohammad is His messenger. Prior to the emergence of Islam, Arabs were pagans and each tribe had several idols. To introduce the Arabs to monotheism, it was essential that the new convert utter words to deny any former pagan beliefs and accept that there was only one God and Mohammad was His prophet. This tenet has survived to this day and a new convert to Islam must say the *Shahada* three times in front of witnesses to become a Moslem.

Prayer - *salat*, (*namaz* in Persian), must be recited by heart and in Arabic. A Moslem is obligated to pray five times a day at set times. Established rituals must be followed scrupulously.

These prayers are: 1) *Fajr* - dawn prayer, (from dawn until just before sunrise). *Zuhr* - after midday prayer, (after midday until afternoon). 3) *Asr* - late afternoon prayer, (from late afternoon until just before sunset). 4) *Maghreb* - after sunset prayer, (after sunset until daylight ends). 5) *Isha* - night prayer, (night until midnight or dawn).

Before praying, a Moslem must perform *wudu*, (*wuzu* in Persian) which is the necessary ritual for the cleanliness and is the ablution of hands, feet and face. The two sexes perform *wudu* and pray separately.

When starting the *wudu*, the supplicant must make a *niyyah* (non-verbal intention) by saying: *bismillahir rahmanir rahim* (in the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the most Kind.) He or she is now ready to perform the ablution which is done as follows: hands and wrists are washed three times. A handful of water is put into the mouth and the mouth is rinsed three times. Next, the worshiper cleans the nose by sniffing water into the nostrils three times, and then blows the nose. The face is washed three times, from the right ear to the left ear and from the forehead to the throat. The arms are washed three times up to the elbows. Wet palms are rubbed over the

head, starting from the top of the forehead to the neck. Fingers are rubbed into the grooves and holes of ears, and the backs of the hands are rubbed over the nape. Next, both feet and ankles are washed three times. At this time the worshiper is ready to start praying. The prayer could be performed privately at home, in the workplace, in the street, or preferably in a mosque in congregation. If the prayer is to be performed in a mosque he will walk to the prayer hall, leave the shoes outside and enter.

There are subtle differences as to how Sunnis and Shi'as perform their *wudu*. Sunnis, as described, wash their hands and wrists, then the elbows. Shi'as believe this method is unhygienic since it brings the germs in the fingers up instead getting rid of them. Shi'as cup each hand, fill it with water and then pour it below their elbows three times letting the water carry the germs outwards, away from the fingers. Feet and legs are cleansed in the same manner by pouring water from below the knees downwards and away from the toes.

Every mosque has a fountain or spigot for ablution. When not praying in a mosque, worshipers use vessels to carry water for their ablution. In Iran, these vessels are called *aftabeh* and are ubiquitous.

If water is not available for ablution, the *wudu* can be performed with dust or sand. This is called *tayammum*. If for any reason the body is considered to be impure, then *ghusl* must be performed which is the washing of the whole body.

In Moslem lands, the public is called to prayer by *adhan* (*azan* in Persian), which is always recited in Arabic. The person who delivers the *adhan* is a *mu'addin* or "crier." At the prescribed time, he will ascend the minaret and while placing one hand on the ear and facing the *qiblah* (the Kaaba, in Mecca, Saudi Arabia) will recite the *adhan*, in Arabic. These days, this is seldom done; *adhan* is recorded and played on loudspeakers and is as follows:

*Allahu akbar!* - Allah is the most great! (repeated four times)

*Shahada* - (repeated four times)

Rush to prayer! - (repeated twice)

Rush to salvation! - (repeated twice)

*Allahu akbar!* - (repeated twice)

There is no god but Allah! - (once)

Moslems believe that the verses in the Koran are God's revelations that were said in classical Arabic to archangel Gabriel (Jibra'il) and were then transmitted to the Prophet Mohammad. (He is the same archangel who had announced the coming of Jesus to the Virgin Mary in Nazareth 600 years earlier). Moslems agree that Mohammad was illiterate and did not write the Koran. The sacred verses uttered by the Prophet were either memorized or written on pieces of leather, bark, camel bones or on stones. After Mohammad's death, all the recorded or memorized verses were collected and written, forming the Koran. Being words of God, the Koran is considered as the constitution of Islam - not an accent or dot has changed since its initial composition.

Eyewitness collections of traditions or sayings of Mohammad are called *hadith*. These hold an important but not sacred position in Islam. Many of the *hadith* are of dubious origins but there are others that are authenticated by scholars who specialize in the study of *hadith*. One of the sayings of Mohammad relates to the initiation of the *adhan* tradition. The early Moslems used to guess the time of prayers. It was suggested to Mohammad to use a bell like the Christians or a trumpet like the horn used by Jews. According to a *hadith*, it was Omar (later to become the second caliph) who was the first to suggest that a man should call (the people) to prayer. Mohammad liked the idea and ordered Bilal, an Ethiopian slave and a gifted singer, to get up and pronounce the *adhan* for prayer. That practice and wordings as chosen by Mohammad have lasted to this date.

Once in the mosque, home, shop or the street, the supplicant must face the *qiblah* and again make a *niyyah*. Worship will start while standing (*qiyam*) by saying Allahu akbar; then the right hand is placed on the left, just below the navel (women and girls put their hands on their chests) and says: O Allah, glory and praise are for You, blessed is Your name, exalted is Your majesty; glory and praise are for You, blessed is Your name, exalted is Your majesty; there is no god but You. I seek shelter to Allah from the rejected Satan. *Bismillahir rahmanir rahim*. After this the worshiper must recite the *al-Fatiha* - the first and the most important of the 114 *suras* (chapters) in the Koran that says:

All praise for Allah, the Lord of the Universe.

The Most merciful, the Most Kind. Master of the Day of Judgement.

You alone we worship, from You alone we seek help. Guide us along the straight path. The path of those who you have favored, not of those who have earned Your anger nor of those who go astray.

Amen.

Next, the worshiper could recite any *sura* or *ayeh* (sentence) from the Koran. Having done that, he or she does the *ruku* (bow), puts the hands on the knees and says: *Allahu akbar* and glory to my Lord the great; three times and returns to the *qiyam* (upright position). Next the worshiper does the *sujud* (prostration); he or she kneels and touches the floor with the forehead, nose and palms of hands while reciting *Allahu akbar* and then says: Glory to My Lord, the Highest; three times. After this, the prayer gets up from the floor, sits upright with knees bent and palms placed on them. After a moment, he prostrates again and says *Allahu akbar* three times. *Salam* (salutation) is the final act. While seated, he will look on each side and say: "The peace and mercy of Allah be with you." Then the worshiper will get up. This completes one *rak'ah*, i.e., one unit of prayer. Usually another or several *rak'ahs* are said after this, starting with the recitation of the *al-Fatiha*.

There are other differences between prayer practices of Sunnis and Shi'as. In *qiyam*, Shi'as, while standing, keep their hands on their sides and while reciting the *al-Fatiha*, hold both palms in front of their faces as if reading the Koran.

Shi'as perform the *sujud* in a different manner too. They use a small, ochre-colored round clay seal a *mohr* in front of them. The clay for the *mohr* is brought from the holy city of Najaf (in

Iraq) where Hoseyn, the grandson of the Prophet was slain in AD 680. To remember his martyrdom, the place the *mohr* in front of them and touch it with their foreheads when prostrating.

When traveling in Moslem countries or meeting devout Moslems elsewhere, one occasionally runs into men with small round, dark scar in the middle of their foreheads. This is considered a sign of piety caused by the innumerable prostrations and rubbing of the forehead against the floor, or in case of Shi'as, against the *mohr*.

Of all the daily prayers, “The Friday [*zuhr/noon*] Prayer” is the most important. It is required that Moslems say it in congregation. A high-ranking imam: the *khatib*, starts the prayer by delivering the *khutbah* (sermon or oration). In countries where Sharia, (the strict Islamic Law) is practiced, it is after this all-important prayer that those found in violation of the Law by religious courts are dealt with in the courtyard of the mosque and in front of the congregation.

*Qiblah* “anything opposite” is, as already mentioned, the direction in which all Moslems must pray. The direction, no matter in what part of the world, is always towards the Kaaba, the cube-like building in the center of the vast courtyard in the Sacred Mosque in the holy city of Mecca, in Saudi Arabia. The Kaaba, is therefore, the epicenter of the faith. (*Qiblah* is so important that even in some airlines owned by Islamic governments like Saudia, there are prayer rooms in the rear of the planes with a compass and an arrow directed towards Mecca so that the devout could properly worship while flying.) Before the advent of Islam, in the times called the “Age of Ignorance,” i.e., before becoming “Enlightened” by Islam, Arabs were heathens and used to worship idols. Mecca used to be a small hamlet situated in a barren land between two steep ranges in the west of present-day Saudi Arabia. In it, there was, (and still is) a fountain of potable water called Zemzem. (a true luxury for desert dwelling bedouins.) With time it became a permanent settlement and an important commercial hub. In the middle of Mecca, was a square, roofless sanctuary with low walls. Different bedouin tribes had stored 360 idols in and around the space, making it a Pantheon of sorts. When Mohammad was born in Mecca in 570 AD, the pagan temple was transformed into a cube, and was called *al-Kaaba*, (the origin of the word “cube.”)

The Qureish, Mohammad's clan, were the custodians of the Kaaba. Several years after Mohammad had started his ministry, he was driven out of Mecca by his enemies who had anticipated the loss of revenue from the pilgrims. (The Migration in 622 AD, called the *hejirah*, became the start of the Islamic era.) Mohammad and his followers settled in a city in the north of Mecca called Yathreb - present day Medina. As time passed, there were more converts to Islam and Mohammad established a mosque in Medina. Since the new faith was strongly influenced by Judaism (with some help from Christianity) and almost all the prophets of the Old Testament (and Jesus) were accepted in the new faith, he elected Jerusalem, the Jewish *qiblah*, to be the Moslem Qiblah too. After seventeen months, realizing that jews did not accept him as a Messenger of God, he changed the *qiblah* towards Kaaba, which was still a pagan temple. (With the other two Semitic faiths venerating Jerusalem, if the first Islamic *qiblah* was preserved, world

history would have been quiet different!)

In 629, Mohammad, having militarily subdued his enemies including his fellow tribesmen, the Qureish, marched into Mecca. He entered the Kaaba and ordered all the 360 idols destroyed. He made the first haj pilgrimage to the mountain of Arafat, in the vicinity of Mecca, delivered a sermon and thus, established the haj tradition.

Although the Kaaba is known to exist centuries before the advent of Islam, Moslems believe Adam had initially built it in heaven where a model still exists. Two thousand years before the creation of the world, Adam erected a copy of it on earth. At the Deluge, it was destroyed and Allah ordered Ibrahim (Abraham) assisted by his son Ismail (Ishmael) and his wife Hagar, to build it where it still is.

The Kaaba, also known as the “Ancient House,” was destroyed by fire, flooding and by marauding tribes several times in the past. The present Kaaba is the sixth since Mohammad’s time. Unlike the old ones that were constructed with easily burned timber, it is now built with rectangular blocks of grey Mecca stones cemented together. Each wall is about 50 feet tall; it is a cube but not a geometrically perfect one. As always, its roof is flat. In the eastern wall, seven feet above ground, there is a double door made of brass with Koranic verses embossed on it. This door affords entrance to the empty chamber within. Moslems believe God lives in the chamber and for this reason they refer to the Kaaba as the “House of God.” Inside, the floor and walls are covered with marble slabs and with Koranic inscriptions inserted in the marble. The door is opened only once a year, before the holy month of haj. The king of Saudi Arabia inaugurates the haj season by first praying in front the Kaaba; then climbing a wooden ladder and entering the ‘holiest of the holy’ and performing a ceremonial sweeping of the floor and sprinkling of rosewater around the room. The door is then bolted and kept locked until the beginning of the next haj season.

The Kaaba is always covered with the black *kisvah* (veil or robe) made of coarse cloth. There are Koranic verses embroidered with gold thread horizontally on top and vertically over the two flaps covering the door. In the past centuries the *kisveh* used to be in red or blue but now it is always in black, giving the Kaaba an imposing appearance. For many centuries the *kisvah* used to be sewn and embroidered in Egypt and carried with a special caravan to Mecca. Since the last century, thanks to Italians who exported a weaving factory, it is now sewn and embroidered in Saudi Arabia. The *kisvah* is changed annually before the commencement of the haj. Pieces of the old cloth are sold to the pilgrims to keep as souvenirs of their pilgrimage and proceeds are donated to Moslem charities.

In 2001, I visited an Iranian friend in Chicago who had returned from his haj pilgrimage. In his living room, and in a conspicuous place, was a framed, one foot by one foot, square piece of *kisveh* with beautifully embroidered golden calligraphy. He had happily paid \$45,000 for it. To him it was a piece of religious art, steeped in blessings for having covered the “House of God” for a whole year. He was elated and felt proud for being so close to his Creator. Knowing that I

was a Christian, he discreetly reminded me that I would never be so privileged.

Much has been said about the *Hajarul - Aswad*, the Black Stone. The meteorite was discovered by early bedouins who had bought it to their sanctuary in Mecca and had worshiped it as a celestial relic. Originally the Stone was larger but was later broken into pieces by hostile Arab tribes. Now it is only 12 inches in diameter. It has no religious significance except that according to a *hadith* by an eyewitness, Mohammad had lifted it and after kissing it, had left it on the side of the Kaaba. The Stone is now embedded in the southeast corner of the Kaaba within a silver container. As Mohammad had done, pilgrims emulate him by caressing and kissing it (after standing in line for long periods.) After millions of kisses, the Stone now has a smooth appearance.

The Kaaba is the most sacred sight of al-Islam. Even the Zemzem well, once a watering hole to the visiting tribes and their camels, has become a hallowed place. Mecca and its environs are blessed sites. Non-Moslems, being infidels (or *kafirs* i.e. all those who do not believe in the ministry of Mohammad and do not accept him as the messenger of Allah) are barred from approaching and desecrating it. To protect its sanctity, there are guards and signs miles away around the periphery of the city to prevent any intrusions by the infidels. Even planes are not allowed to fly over the city for this reason. Any infidel discovered inside the sacred premises will be dealt with very harshly. Despite the serious consequences of intruding in the holy premises, there have been several Christians and Jews who had, throughout centuries, entered the sacred premises and had lived to write about their daring experience.