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This text gives an introduction to the meaning of whispered prayers as found in Islamic traditions, the internal need for people to whisper to God, and the factors that deprive one from praying to Him.

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The Whispered Prayers Of Imam Al-Sajjad, Part 1

Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi

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Abstract

Munajat is the Arabic word for “whispered prayers to God in solitude,” while du'a, or “supplication” is the general meaning that refers to a request to God in any manner, whether it be long or short, loud or quiet. Summoning to God is highly encouraged by the Ahlul Bayt, and hence, they left people with a rich corpus of supplications to God, including whispered prayers (munajat). This article covers an introduction to the meaning of whispered prayers as found in Islamic traditions, the internal need for people to whisper to God, and the factors that deprive one from praying to Him.

The Meaning Of Munajat And Some Of Its Instances In The Qur'an

The Arabic words munajat and najwa are derived from the same root, and they mean to whisper, to tell secrets, and to speak privately to others. Some maintain that najwa literally means the time when a group speak together in private, either covertly or overtly. The meaning of munajat does not involve speaking secretly and whispering, rather it is a conversation away from others¹

Accordingly, munajat is more in line with speaking softly than speaking loudly and shouting. Hence, reciting munajat (fervent prayers to God in solitude) handed down to us from the Ahl ul-Bayt ('a) or reading poems composed by some in their munajat to God is not considered munajat. Rather they are regarded as reading a munajat because in supplication one composes and recites a prayer to ask God for something, and reciting prayers handed down to us from the Ahl ul-Bayt ('a) is not regarded as one's own prayer since when one reads a prayer, he does not mean to compose it; rather, he retells some sentences. In this case, one does not pray but recites a prayer. Even sometimes one does not attend to the meaning of what he is reciting.

Munajat means telling a secret or speaking privately. There can be munajat (secret, intimate talk) sometimes between two people, sometimes as directed from man to God, and sometimes as directed from God to man. Included in the first type and its blameworthy instances are some Qur'anic references to whispering by hypocrites and disbelievers in God who did so to plot against, sadden, and worry the believers. God addressed the believers, saying:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا تَنَاجَيْتُمْ فَلَا تَنَاجِوْا بِالْإِثْمِ وَالْعُدُوْنِ وَمَعْصِيَتِ الرَّسُولِ وَتَنَاجِوْا بِالْبِرِّ وَالتَّقْوَىٰ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي إِلَيْهِ تُحْشَرُونَ

“O you who have faith! When you talk secretly, do not hold secret talks [imbued] with sin and aggression and disobedience to the Apostle, but talk secretly in [a spirit of] piety and Godfearing, and be wary of Allah toward whom you will be mustered” (58:9).

According to this verse, it is permissible to whisper in the presence of others only if it is advisable, to do good, and only if it does not sadden and worry others. Otherwise, whispering in itself is impolite and inadvisable.

In another verse about those who frequently came to the Prophet (S) and spoke to him, and bothered him to gain an opportunity or a position and to be cherished and acceptable by others, God said:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا تَأْتِيْتُمُ الرَّسُولَ فَقَدِمُوا بَيْنَ يَدَيْ نَجْوَاكُمْ صَدَقَةً ذَلِكَ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ وَأَطْهَرُ فَإِنْ لَّمْ تَجِدُوا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ

“O you who have faith! When you talk secretly to the Apostle, offer a charity before your secret talk. That is better for you and purer. But if you cannot afford [to make the offering], then Allah is indeed all-forgiving, all- merciful” (58: 12).

Prior to the revelation of this verse, the rich in Medina constantly came to the Prophet (S) and talked to him, boasting about it and pretending to be elites who were closer to him than the poor. However, after it was revealed and they were ordered to pay alms to talk privately to the Prophet (S), with the poor being excluded from this rule, nobody but Imam Ali ('a) was willing to talk to the Prophet (S). He sold a dinar for 10 dirhams and for 10 days whenever he was to speak privately to the Prophet (S), he paid one dirham as alms². In the end, when Muslims refused to speak to the Prophet (S) for the fear of paying alms, God abrogated the ruling of paying alms and said:

أَلَّا شَفَقْتُمْ أَنْ تُقْدِمُوا بَيْنَ يَدَيْ نَجْوَاكُمْ صَدَقَاتٍ فَإِذَا لَمْ تَفْعُلُوا وَتَابَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكُمْ فَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَأَتُوا الزَّكَةَ وَأَطْبِعُوا اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ وَاللَّهُ خَيْرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ

“Were you apprehensive of offering charities before your secret talks? So, as you did not do it, and Allah was clement to you, maintain the prayer and pay the zakat, and obey Allah and His Apostle. And Allah is well aware of what you do” (58: 13).

Munajat To God In Hadiths And The Conduct Of The Religious

In our religious custom and literature, munajat is applied to man's whisper and private talk with God, and one's spiritual state and the surrounding environment requires men to talk softly to God. For example, when one wants to confess his sins before God, because he does not want others to know about his sins and faults, he does so softly and by no means enumerates his sins loudly lest others may know about them. Likewise, romantic talks between the lover and the loved one are cryptic and private, and when a servant in love with his Lord is in His presence and whispers softly to Him, the nature of such a talk requires it not to be loud in such a way that others are informed of it.

Unlike munajat, nida (to call) refers to the loud and shouting voice from a long distance. Accordingly, when one calls God, he talks to Him loudly because hardships and afflictions have trapped him, and he calls God out to redress his situation. Compared to these two words, du'a (prayer) has a general and broad meaning and refers to any request in any manner from an either long or a short distance either loudly or softly. In the beginning of Munajat al-Sha'baniyyah, all three words du'a, nida, and munajat are used, and the Infallible Imam ('a) said:

وَاسْمَعْ دُعَائِي إِذَا دَعَوْتُكَ وَاسْمَعْ نِدَائِي إِذَا نَادَيْتَكَ وَأَقْبِلْ عَلَيَّ إِذَا نَاجَيْتَكَ

“Please accept my prayer, whenever I pray to you, please listen to my call, whenever I call You out, and please pay attention to me when I pray to You fervently in solitude”³

يَا رَبِّ أَبْعِدْ أَنْتَ مِنِّي فَأَنَادِيكَ أَمْ قَرِيبٌ فَأَنْاجِيكَ فَأَقْوَحَ اللَّهُ إِلَيْهِ أَنَا جَلِيسٌ مَنْ نَكَرَنِي

Prophet Muhammad (S) was quoted as saying that Prophet Moses ('a) said in munajat to God: “O my Lord! Are You keeping away from me so that I may call You out, or are You close to me so that I whisper to You?” Allah revealed to him: “I am the companion of the one who remembers Me”⁴

In another narration, Imam Ali ('a) said about some virtues of the month of Ramadan and munajat during it:

بَشِّرْ أَيْهَا الصَّائِمُ فَإِنَّكَ فِي شَهْرٍ صِيَامُكَ فِيهِ مَفْرُوضٌ وَنَفْسُكَ فِيهِ تَسْبِيحٌ وَتَوْمُكَ فِيهِ عِبَادَةٌ وَطَاعَاتُكَ فِيهِ مَقْبُولَةٌ
وَذُنُوبُكَ فِيهِ مَغْفُورَةٌ وَأَصْوَاتُكَ فِيهِ مَسْمُوعَةٌ وَمَنَاجَاتُكَ فِيهِ مَرْحُومَةٌ

“O the fasting one! Glad tidings to you; verily you are in the month when it is obligatory for you to fast, your breath is considered as glorification, your sleep is an act of worship, your obedience is accepted [by God], your sins are forgiven, your calls and requests are heard, and your munajat receives the Divine attention and mercy.”⁵

Explaining “your calls and requests are heard,” one should say that sometimes a child, a mentally disabled person, or an unknown person says something in a gathering which remains unattended. Under such circumstances, it is said that his word is unheard, or nobody pays attention to him. Likewise, God may ignore a sinner’s request because of the distance and veil caused by his sins. However, on special and blessed days such as the blessed Month of Ramadan, God grants His servants a general audience and promises to include them in His vast favour and mercy, to pay attention to and grant their requests.

This Divine favour implies the significance of munajat and its effects during these special days. Of course, according to some narrations, apart from the blessed Month of Ramadan and special times,

munajat is significantly important at certain times like at dawn when it receives special attention of God.

Imam al-Sadiq ('a) says:

وَانِ الْعَبْدِ إِذَا حَتَّىٰ بِسَيِّدِهِ فِي جَوْفِ اللَّيْلِ [الْمُظْلَمْ] وَنَاجَاهُ أَتَيْتَ اللَّهَ النُّورَ فِي فَقْلِهِ، فَإِذَا قَالَ: يَا رَبِّ يَا رَبِّ، نَادَاهُ الْجَلِيلُ جَلَّ جَلَلُهُ: لَبَّيْكَ عَبْدِي سَلَّى أَعْطَكَ وَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَىٰ أَكْفَكَ . ثُمَّ يَقُولُ حَلْ جَلَلُهُ لِمَلَائِكَتِهِ: إِنَّمَّا لَكُنْتَنِي، انْظُرُوا إِلَيَّ عَبْدِي فَقَدْ تَخَلَّىٰ بِي فِي جَوْفِ اللَّيْلِ الْمُظْلَمِ وَالْبَطَالُونَ لَاهُونَ وَالْغَافِلُونَ نِيَامٌ اشْهَدُوا أَنِّي غَفَرْتُ لَهُ

"When a servant communes with his Lord in solitude at midnight, Allah will enlighten his heart. Then when he says, 'O' my Lord! O' my Lord!' Allah, the Glorious, the Majestic says in response, 'Here I am, My servant! Ask Me so that I may grant you, trust in Me so that I am sufficient for you.' Then Allah tells His angels. 'O My angels! Look at my servant who is supplicating Me at midnight when the pleasure-seekers are indulging in sensual pleasures in vain, and the ignorant are sleeping. Testify that I will include him in my forgiveness."⁶

Man's Need To Whisper To God

Naturally, everybody likes to speak privately to great people. The student likes to attract the instructor's attention to himself; hence, he goes to the instructor after the class to ask him his questions privately. In addition to the times when great people have a general audience, and everybody benefits from their presence, one likes to be honoured with association and friendship to them, to speak to them privately and enjoy their affection and regard. Private conversation with great people is of remarkable significance to men and is desired by them. If we are told that our Leader has given us an appointment, and we can go to him and have a private meeting with him, we accept it wholeheartedly, exult over meeting him, and put up with the expenses and hardships of trip so that we could meet him in person and listen to his words.

No doubt, the believer and the one knowing about the grandeur of God and His compassion and blessings tastes the delight of private conversation with Him and always seeks to retreat in solitude, particularly in the holy Month of Ramadan, which is the spring of prayer and munajat, so that he can talk to his Lord and recite the prayers of Iftitah and Abu-Hamzah Thumali, thereby making his love bond with his Lord stronger. On the other hand, the ignorant have not tasted the pleasure of talking to their Lord. It is the true believers who know how pleasurable the conversation with God is and that the one who has the succour to speak privately is of a high spiritual rank.

In some narrations, the factors in succour for munajat and private conversation with God are referred to. For example, Prophet Muhammad (S) related a Divine Hadith as follows,

إِذَا عِلِّمْتُ أَنَّ الْغَالِبَ عَلَىٰ عَبْدِي الْأَشْتِغَالَ فِي نَقْلِتُ شَهْوَتَهُ فِي مَسَأَلَتِي وَمُنَاجَاتِي

“Whenever I see a servant often pondering on Me, I make him interested in requesting Me and doing munajat to Me”⁷

Mankind is naturally inclined to the worldly and menial issues, but when one’s attention is mostly directed to God, he will be included in God’s mercy and favour and will taste the pleasure of munajat and conversation with Him to such an extent that his greatest desire is munajat to Him. On the contrary, when one spends his time and attention mostly on the worldly affairs and pleasures, and his heart is replete with fondness of and attachment to this world, always thinking about what to wear, what to eat, how to own a luxury house, how to be promoted to a higher position, and indulging himself in watching movies that gives him considerable worldly pleasures, he is deprived of tasting the pleasure of munajat to God.

Factors That Deprive One From Whispering To God

Considering the greatness of munajat to God, the significance of a relationship with God, its role in one’s worldly and otherworldly salvation, and the losses incurred by being deprived of this big Divine relief, it is advisable that one knows what causes man not to enjoy whispering to God. In some narrations, these factors are introduced; for example, the Hadith of Heavenly Ascent, where He told His Beloved, Prophet Muhammad (S):

يَا أَحْمَدَ لَوْ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ أَهْلُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَيَصُومُ صِيَامَ أَهْلِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَيَطْوِي مِنَ الطَّعَامِ مِثْلَ
الْمَلَائِكَةِ وَلِبْسَ الْعَارِيِّ ثُمَّ أُرِيَ فِي قَلْبِهِ مِنْ حُبِّ الدُّنْيَا ذَرَّةً أَوْ سَمِعَتْهَا أَوْ رَئَسَتْهَا أَوْ خَلَيْهَا أَوْ زَيَّنَتْهَا لَا
جَارُنِي فِي دَارِي وَلَا تَزَعَّنَّ مِنْ قَلْبِهِ مُحِبَّتِي وَلَا ظَلَمَنَ قَلْبَهُ حَتَّى يَنْسَانِي وَلَا أَذِيقَهُ حَلَوَهُ مُحِبَّيِ

“O’ Ahmad! If a servant prays and fasts as much as all dwellers of the heavens and the earth, and if he, like angels, avoids eating foods and wears the garment of the devout [act like them], then to the slightest amount there is love of this world, pretence, hypocrisy, and love for leadership, fame, or the worldly ornaments in his heart, I will deprive him of My proximity and force My love out of his heart (i.e., I will darken his heart so much that he forgets Me, and I will never make him taste My love)”⁸

About Prophet David (‘a), it is said that God addressed him, saying,

مَا لِأَوْلَيَانِي وَالْهُمْ بِالْدُّنْيَا إِنَّ الْهُمَّ يُنْهِبُ حَلَوَهُ مُنَاجَاتِي مِنْ قُلُومِ

“My friend should not endeavour nor grieve for this world because this will take the sweetness of munajat to Me away from his heart.”⁹

The one who is attached to this world should not expect to have satisfaction in munajat to God. If such people pray to God, their motives do not go beyond the hope for acceptance of their requests and

forgiveness of their sins. Throughout the prayer, they will be weary and lethargic, and won't enjoy whispering to Him.

Imam al-Sadiq ('a) was quoted as narrating a Divine Hadith addressing Prophet David ('a); God revealed to him:

لَا تَجْعَلْ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكَ عَالِي مَفْتُونًا بِالدُّنْيَا فَيَصُدُّكَ عَنْ طَرِيقِ مَحَبَّنِي، فَإِنَّ أُولَئِكَ قُطَّاعَ طَرِيقِ عِبَادِي الْمُرِيدِينَ. إِنَّ أَنَّنِي مَا أَنَا صَانِعٌ بِهِمْ أَنْ أَنْزِعَ حَلَوَهُ مُنَاجَاتِي عَنْ قُلُوبِهِمْ

“Do not make a scholar deceived [by this world] as the intermediary between Me and yourselves lest he may prevent you from the path of My love and friendship. That is because they are like robbers [invading] my servants who seek Me. Verily the smallest punishment I impose on them is to deprive their hearts of sweetness of munajat to Me”¹⁰

1. Sayyid Ali-Akbar Qurayshi, Qamus-e Qur'an, vol. 7, p. 27.

2. Huwayzi, Tafsir Nur al-Thaqalayn, vol. 29, p. 299.

3. Mafatih al-Jinan, Munajat al-Sha'baniyah.

4. Hurr Amili, Wasa'il-u-Shi'a, vol. 1, the sections on Rulings of Solitude, section 7, p.311, Hadith no. 820.

5. Shaykh Saduq, Fada'il al-Ashhur al-Thalathah, p. 109.

6. Muhibbullah Nuri, Mustadrak al-Wasa'il, vol. 5, p. 207.

7. Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, Bihar-ul-Anwar, vol. 93, section 13, p. 162, Hadith no. 42.

8. Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, Bihar-ul-Anwar, vol. 74, section 30, vol. 30, p. 6.

9. Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, Bihar-ul-Anwar, vol. 82, section 61, vol. 143, p. 26.

10. Kulayni, Al-Kafi, vol. 1, section al-Musta'kil bi 'Ilmihi wal-Mubahih bih, p. 46, Hadith no. 4.

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