



CORDOBA HOUSE

First online khutbah as a result of the coronavirus enforced social distancing

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Due to the enforced social distancing required by the coronavirus epidemic, many Muslims have wondered if it was permissible to perform an online jum`a prayer. You may have seen a circulated fatwa that determined that an online jum`a would not meet the classical requirements of jum`a prayer under the rules of all the major schools of Islamic jurisprudence. The reasoning in this fatwa essentially was based on the physical necessity of being together. This is perfectly understandable because until the development of modern technology there was no way for anyone to see the khatib or hear his sermon and participate in the ambience of the experience. But is this argument persuasive in our modern age? And even if it were, should not the application of necessity and need—an established principle in Islamic jurisprudence—permit us to suspend this argument during this time of the coronavirus pandemic?

The Islamic juristic principle of al-darurah tubih ul-mahzurat, which means necessity or need permits that which is forbidden, has been applied by classical Muslim jurists to situations of necessity. Thus e.g. if a Muslim suffering a bad cold or flu needs to consume a medication like Nyquil that contains alcohol, it is deemed halal to consume it to the extent and for the duration of the illness.

Clearly this time of an international pandemic is a time of necessity and need.

While the above will be sufficient justification for many of you, my khutbah today will further and more fully explain and unpack our opinion as to why conducting an online Jum`a prayer in our modern times, especially under these physically limiting social distancing circumstances of the coronavirus, should be deemed valid.

We arrive at this decision because we don't define our humanity just or primarily physically. Our spiritual masters have taught us that we are also mental/intellectual beings, we are emotional/psychic beings, and we are most importantly spiritual beings. Our spiritual dimension is the primary and defining dimension both of our humanity and of our religious imperatives. Your soul is where the creative breath of God within you lies. Your soul is the locomotive of your life and existence. Your soul is the eternal part of you, your soul is the part of you that will be resurrected and judged. In suras an-nur, yasin and fussilat, Allah makes it clear that on Judgment Day our hearing and sight, our tongues, hands and legs, and even our skins, will bear witness against our souls [24:24],

يَوْمَ نَشْهَدُ عَلَيْهِمْ أَلْسِنَتُهُمْ وَأَيْدِيهِمْ وَأَرْجُلُهُمْ بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ

[36:65],

الْيَوْمَ نَحْتِمُ عَلَىٰ أَقْوَاهِهِمْ وَتُكَلِّمُنَا أَيْدِيهِمْ وَتَشْهَدُ أَرْجُلُهُمْ بِمَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ

[41:18-22]

وَنَجِّنَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَكَانُوا يَتَّقُونَ (١٨) وَيَوْمَ يُحْشَرُ أَعْدَاءُ اللَّهِ إِلَى النَّارِ فَهُمْ يُوزَعُونَ (١٩) حَتَّىٰ إِذَا مَا جَاءُوهَا شَهِدَ عَلَيْهِمْ سَمْعُهُمْ وَأَبْصَرُهُمْ وَجُلُودُهُمْ بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ (٢٠) وَقَالُوا لَوْلَا جُئِدُنَا لَمَنَّا لِمَ شَهِدْتُم عَلَيْنَا قَالُوا أَنطَقْنَا اللَّهُ الَّذِي أَنطَقَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ وَهُوَ خَلَقَكُمْ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ (٢١) وَمَا كُنْتُمْ تَسْتَتِرُونَ أَن يَشْهَدَ عَلَيْكُمْ سَمْعُكُمْ وَلَا أَبْصَرُكُمْ وَلَا جُلُودُكُمْ وَلَكِن ظَنَنْتُمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَعْلَمُ كَثِيرًا مِّمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ (٢٢)

The jum`ah is much more than a physical activity; it is primarily a spiritual activity, and to the extent that we can convey the spiritual dynamic online, this in our judgment validates the online jum`ah.

The difference between a Jum`a prayer and a congregational dhuhr prayer is the *reduction* of the salah from four rak`ats to two, and the addition of a sermon, the khutbah, with a clear and definite emphasis on the sermon. Allah alludes to this in the commandment in Sura Jum`ah wherein He says, [62:9],

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا إِذَا نُودِيَ لِلصَّلَاةِ مِنْ يَوْمِ الْجُمُعَةِ فَاسْعَوْا إِلَىٰ ذِكْرِ اللَّهِ وَذَرُوا الْبَيْعَ ذَٰلِكُمْ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ

“O you who have believed, when the call is made for the salah on Friday, hasten to the remembrance of Allah—ya ayyuhalladhina amanu, idha nudiya li-ssalati min yawm il-jum`ati fas`au ila dhikrillah.” The language doesn’t say “hasten to the salah,” but “hasten to the remembrance of God,” suggesting thereby that it is the sermon that provides the remembrance of God and is the focus of the Jum`a. While it is true that the salah is a form of remembering God, Allah Himself differentiates between them by saying in sura Ankabut [29:45],

إِنَّ الصَّلَاةَ تَنْهَىٰ عَنِ الْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ وَلَذِكْرُ اللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ

“innassalata tanha `anil-fahsha`i wal-munkar, wa la dhikrullahi akbar,” which means “indeed salah erases indecency and unacceptable behavior, but certainly the remembrance of Allah is even greater (in effect).”

Clearly then, the khutbah, which differentiates the jum`a from a regular dhuhr prayer, is intended to provide that vortex of divine remembrance that draws the congregation into remembering God.

In this verse that commands the believers to the jum`a prayer, the remembrance of God is what's called the operative cause—the `illah in Islamic jurisprudence—of this Quranic commandment. The `illah is the purpose for which any specific law is legislated, and this

purpose trumps the letter of the law because it is the desired or intended objective of the law. So when Allah commands us to fast in the following words [2:183],

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ

“kutiba `alaykum ussiyami kama kutiba `alaladhina min qablikum la`allakum tattaqun; fasting is prescribed upon you as it was prescribed upon those before you *so that you may become pious*,” the `illah here, i.e. the intended objective, is that we gain in taqwa. So if we fast and don't gain any taqwa, our fasting has been useless. This explains the Prophet's hadith “many a fasting person gains nothing from their fast but hunger and thirst, and many a person who does qiyam [praying supererogatory prayers at night] gains nothing from their prayer but fatigue.”

Analogously, while the jum`a prayer certainly has a physical dimension and effort to it, dhikrullah, the remembrance of God, is its operative cause, its `illah in the Quranic phrasing, and its purpose. Without it, the jum`ah is spiritually invalid. As the very first khatib of the jum`a prayer, our Prophet Muhammad, whom the Quran describes as a mudhakkir, meaning a person who reminds (of Allah), powerfully drew his companions into a spiritual vortex of Divine remembrance.

We find the evidence of this in a hadith about a young man named Hanzala (who died in the Battle of Badr, the first battle the Prophet had to fight). One day he walked by Abu Bakr, who greeted him and asked how he was. Hanzala responded by expressing his fear that he might have become a hypocrite, which was something that the Prophet's companions were very concerned about, especially as the Quran repeatedly underlines the importance of sincerity of faith--ikhlas. When Abu Bakr, shocked to hear this, asked why, Hanzala answered, “because when I'm in the presence of the Messenger of God, and he talks to us about Allah, heaven and hell, I feel as if I can see all that; but when I return to my family and busy myself with my work, I lose that feeling.” Abu Bakr admitted that he too experienced the same, so they both decided to approach the Prophet to ask him. When Hanzala repeated his complaint, the Prophet smiled and answered, “If you can maintain that state that you experience in my presence, the angels would certainly greet you [la-safahatkum ul-mala'ikatu] in your homes and in the streets, [meaning in private and in public]. But there are times and there are times,” which the Prophet repeated three times.

A Prophet by definition is the locus of a powerful spiritual vortex. When he speaks of God and channels God's presence, God's power and God's arguments, he draws his audience spiritually, intellectually and emotionally into a divine vortex of remembrance. The Prophet is our exemplar in how we perform our religious and spiritual rites. Imagine what it would have been like to listen to the Prophet deliver a sermon, and to feel what Hanzala and the Prophet's companions felt! This function of drawing people's hearts and minds to the remembrance of God is what jurists have referred to inadequately, in my opinion, as wa`z, a necessarily required component of the jum`a khutbah. Wa`z more accurately refers to warning the congregation about God, and serves by invoking the fear of God and fear of His Justice to prod us into piety. Dhikrullah functions in the opposite direction; it appeals to our desire to love God and desire His

intimacy and togetherness, which Muslim scholars have called ma`iyyatullah, meaning companionship of God, literally ‘togetherness-with-God.’ The purpose of remembering God, the purpose of the jum`a prayer, i.e. divine remembrance, is about generating in ourselves a deeper ma`iyyatullah—a deeper ‘with-God-ness.’ To remember God so that He remembers us, as He commands us, udhkuruni adhkurkum.

This is what Hanzala and the companions felt in the Prophet’s presence, and this is the purpose of the jum`a prayer.

We have all experienced the difference between performing a salah that was good and spiritually enriching, and performing a purely mechanical salah that wasn’t spiritually connected at all. We have all also experienced a khutbah where we felt drawn to Allah, our hearts softened and inspired to do our utmost to merit Allah’s forgiveness, compassion and mercy. And we have all experienced a khutbah where we were yelled and shouted at, our intelligence insulted, and made to feel that we were nothing but sinners destined to hell, leaving the jum`ah prayer feeling spiritually malnourished.

In the beautiful Quranic verse 23 of sura al-Zumar, Allah asserts that “Allah has sent down the finest speech, a Book with folded and resembling meanings, which raises goosebumps on the skins of those who fear Allah, after which their skins and hearts soften to the remembrance of God.” [39:23],

اللَّهُ نَزَّلَ أَحْسَنَ الْحَدِيثِ كِتَابًا مُتَشَابِهًا مَثَانِيَ تَقْشَعِرُّ مِنْهُ جُلُودُ الَّذِينَ يَخْشَوْنَ رَبَّهُمْ ثُمَّ تَلِينُ جُلُودُهُمْ وَقُلُوبُهُمْ
إِلَى ذِكْرِ اللَّهِ ذَلِكَ هُدَى اللَّهِ يَهْدِي بِهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَمَنْ يُضَلِلِ اللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُ مِنْ هَادٍ

Allahu nazzala ahsana l-hadithi kitaban mutashabihan mathaniya taqsha`irru minhu juludulladhina yakshawna rabbahum, thumma tulinu juluduhum wa qulubuhum ila dhikrillah. Dhalika hudallahi yahdi bihi man yasha’. Such is Allah’s guidance by which He guides whom He wills [or whomsoever will.]

As the end of this verse informs us, this is how Allah guides us; and this is how Allah, through His Prophet, attracted and guided his followers. They felt this spiritual vortex of dhikrullah and were guided by it.

As I said earlier, our spiritual teachers have taught us that we human beings are a blend of four dimensions of being: we have a physical dimension, an intellectual or mental dimension, an emotional or psychic dimension, and a spiritual dimension comprising our soul. We are to maximally deploy all these four aspects of our being in our worship. This is why when Jesus Christ was asked what the greatest commandment was, he answered by quoting from the Torah of Moses what Moses commanded his community, “to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, all of your mind, all of your soul and all of your strength.” This means to engage ourselves with Allah emotionally, mentally, spiritually and physically altogether to the maximum ability we can summon. (I quote Moses and Jesus because Allah commands us to believe in what He has sent down to Muhammad and what He has sent down before

Muhammad. And we accept this divine commandment, said by Moses and Jesus because it is so clearly and evidently true.)

All religion is fundamentally and primarily spiritual: it is about saving our souls by connecting them to God and strengthening this connection by continuing to nourish our souls. As Jesus said, “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?” Allah swears in sura shams [91:1-10],

وَالشَّمْسِ وَضُحَاهَا (١) وَالْقَمَرِ إِذَا تَلَّهَا (٢) وَالنَّهَارِ إِذَا جَلَّهَا (٣) وَاللَّيْلِ إِذَا يَغْشَاهَا (٤) وَالسَّمَاءِ وَمَا بَنَاهَا
(٥) وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا طَحَاهَا (٦) وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا (٧) فَأَلْهَمَهَا فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَاهَا (٨) قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكَّاهَا (٩)
وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ دَسَّاهَا (١٠)

“by the soul and by Him Who formed it [wa nafsina wa ma sawwaha], then Who inspired it with its licentiousness and its piety [fa alhamaha fujuraha wa taqwaha]. Qad aflaha man zakkaha wa qad khaba man dassaha, Allah adds; meaning, “successful is the one who purifies it, and the loser is the one who buries [the word dassa also means to step on or destroy] it.” Allah rhetorically asks wa man yarghabu `an millati Ibrahima illa man safiha nafsah? “And who turns away from the path of Abraham except the one who dishonors his own soul?” safiha means to be stupid, foolish, to discredit, dishonor, to depreciate. Every act of worship is intended to appreciate, purify and raise up and honor our souls; every act that depreciates our soul, sullies it, dishonors and debases it, even if performed physically as an act of worship, is wrong.

Our acts of worship certainly have a physical dimension and do provide physical benefit. But their primary goal and purpose is not physical. The same applies to the engagement of our mental and emotional dimensions of being. Worship is mentally and emotionally beneficial. But most important is the engagement of our spiritual being, for that is what validates and determines the value of our acts of worship. Absent that, our acts of worship are empty. Thus Allah critiques in sura ma`un those who pray and are unmindful of their prayers, who show off, and who prevent aid. [107:4-7],

فَوَيْلٌ لِلْمُصَلِّينَ (٤) الَّذِينَ هُمْ عَنْ صَلَاتِهِمْ سَاهُونَ (٥) الَّذِينَ هُمْ يُرَاءُونَ (٦) وَيَمْنَعُونَ الْمَاعُونَ (٧)

Fa waylun lil-musallin, alladhina hum `an salatihim sahun; alladhina hum yura`una wa yamna`unal-ma`un. Physical presence and perfection of physical performance, without spiritual presence, without spiritual correctness and without purity of intention not only invalidates our prayers in Allah’s eyes and judgment; *it invokes Allah’s anger.*

Our modern technology allows us to be spiritually, intellectually and emotionally present together even though we may not be physically together—the precise opposite of what elicits God’s anger in Sura al- Ma`un. Why should it elicit Allah’s disapproval as a valid jum`ah?

The Prophet instructed us that when he has commanded us to do something, that we should perform it to the best that we can. Based on this, an elderly infirm person who cannot perform

sujud and then stand is allowed to perform their prayers while seated. The imperfection and limitations of our physical capacity to perform salah has no negative impact on its spiritual value. So if the 'best of our capacity' during this coronavirus pandemic is to perform jum`a online, why shouldn't the same argument apply?

Another value of the jum`a is its creating of and sustaining a feeling of community. While the whole ummah of Muhammad comprises one global community, we are at the same time members of sub- communities within the global ummah. Every such sub-community, or parish, to borrow a term from our Christian brethren, comprises a community that is bonded by a particular mosque and is anchored in and by its jum`ah prayer. Islamic law indirectly recognizes and validates our parish sub-communities by the fact that the jum`ah prayer is not an obligation upon a traveler but upon the resident.

The pandemic has heightened our sense of vulnerability. It has engendered in all faith communities a much greater sense of spiritual urgency. It has amplified our collective need to connect with God. Our sub-communities feel a deeper spiritual hunger and desire to nourish their souls. They long to feel and sustain their sense of being part of a community under God and under His protection, a sense now frayed by the requirements of social distancing. We desire more fervently to respond to the Quranic commandment to hold fast to the rope of Allah, the rope of faith that He has sent down.

Allah says in a hadith qudsi, that if we make one step towards Allah, He will respond with two steps towards us. If we approach Him walking, He would come to us jogging. Extending this hadith, if we approach Allah online because we can't do it physically, I'm willing to bet on Allah's Mercy, and that Allah will accept our intention, for all actions are judged by their intention as the Prophet said in the very first hadith of Sahih Bukhari's collection.

So let us approach Allah as best as we can under these trying circumstances, and trust in Allah to reciprocate our attempts at remembering Him. Instead of withdrawing Allah's rope, let us cast Allah's rope to all who seek it.

May Allah protect us and bless us
all.

Me dear brothers and sisters, supplicate to Allah that He may
answer us!