

## Fact Sheet

### Prayers & Prayer Rugs In Islam

Guard strictly your prayers. Especially the middle prayer; and stand before God devotedly. (The Qur'an: Surat Af-Baqarah)

#### The importance of prayer and worship

After his Night Journey to Jerusalem and Ascension to Heaven, the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, instructed his followers to pray five times a day. Muslims believe that through prayer we may all communicate with God. During prayer a Muslim will thank God for all the blessings and help given to him. According to the Qur'an prayer may be spoken or silent. It may include praise, confession, thanksgiving, repentance and meditation on behalf of oneself or another person.

#### Why do Muslims use a prayer rug?

It is not compulsory for Muslims to use a prayer rug, but it is a common tradition in many countries. It helps ensure the floor space one is praying on is clean. Most rugs are woven little carpets with a pile, but some are made from felt (matted wool) and are embroidered with coloured woollen thread by hand. Often rugs have images of the Kaftah and the Prophet's mosque in Medina on the upper side of the rug. However, there are several other styles that may include decorated arches, elaborate oil lamps or flowers. The average size of a modern prayer rug is 65cm x 110cm. The rug is normally kept folded in a clean place, and is spread out at times of prayer facing towards Mecca (in Britain, this would be towards the South East), with the top edge of the rug in that direction. Some prayer rugs are used as decorative wall-hangings in the home.

#### How did the prayers come to be what they are today?

By 619 AD Muhammad had been teaching Islam to his followers in Mecca for ten years when the Angel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad one night. He led Muhammad outside to a white mule with wings attached to its thighs. This was the buraq, the spirit horse which had carried previous prophets including Abraham himself. Muhammad mounted the buraq, which immediately flew high into the air. Escorted by Gabriel, they flew over many lands until they arrived in Jerusalem. Waiting for them there were Abraham, Moses, Jesus and many other prophets. Muhammad was asked to lead them in prayer, and he did so.

After the prayers three dishes were placed in front of Muhammad, and he was asked to choose one. One contained water, one wine and the third milk. Muhammad told the prophets that he had once heard a prophecy that if he chose water the



community of Muslims would drown; if he chose wine then they would be led astray from the good life; but if he chose milk then Muhammad and the Muslim community would be guided along the right path of the true religion. Accordingly the Prophet chose the dish of milk and drank from it. Gabriel then told Muhammad that he and his followers would be guided to the true religion of one God.

From Jerusalem, Muhammad travelled up into the sky until he reached the first gate of heaven. An angel, Ishmael, who had 12,000 angels under his command, guarded the gate. Each of those angels was in charge of another 12,000 angels, all of them guarding the gate. As Gabriel led Muhammad through the gate, Ishmael asked who was with him. When Gabriel answered that Muhammad was with him, Ishmael asked 'Is this the one who has been sent to deliver God's message to man?' When Gabriel said it was, Ishmael said some prayers for Muhammad and let him pass. Muhammad climbed through seven heavenly worlds, where he met many of the ancient prophets once again, including Jesus, John the Baptist, Jacob (son of Joseph), Moses and Abraham. He then passed through a second gate, again guarded by thousands of angels, into paradise. There he met and spoke with God, who explained to him the importance of regular prayer for all believers.

On his way back from paradise, Muhammad met Moses, who asked him how many prayers God had ordered for his followers. 'Fifty a day', replied Muhammad. That's too many', said Moses, 'Go back to God and ask to have them reduced'. Muhammad did as Moses suggested and God agreed the number should be reduced to 10 prayers a day, but when Muhammad returned, Moses said that ten was still too much and he should get a further reduction. This time God agreed that Muslims should pray only five times a day. Moses thought this still too many, but Muhammad refused to go back to God again, saying he would be embarrassed to do so. The Prophet continued on his journey and returned that night to Makkah.

After his return to Mecca, Muhammad described to his followers the journey he had made and the new instruction concerning prayer five times a day. This teaching was to become the second main teaching (or pillar) of Islam.

### **The Significance of the Journey**

In Arabic this event is known as Al-Isra wa Al-Miraj, meaning 'the Night Journey and ascension'. This marks an event which is said to have occurred on the night of the 24th Rajab 619AD. As Islam is one of the three main monotheistic religions, the other two being Christianity and Judaism, it recognises all the prophets in the Bible. On his journey, Muhammad received the blessing and advice of several such prophets including Moses and Jesus. The journey had an important role in shaping the worship practices of the Muslim faith, as well as several lessons of spiritual value to the Prophet and his followers. This journey also confirms to Muslims God's promise of the coming of Judgement Day, and the existence of heaven for those who lead good lives, and hell for those who deliberately disobey God's will.

Noorah Al-Gailani, Curator - Islamic Civilisations, Glasgow Museums, prepared this leaflet for The Burrell Collection Islamic displays, October 2004.

### **The call to prayer**

The call to prayer is usually made from a mosque's minaret (tower). The caller alerts the neighbourhood that it is time to pray. He recites a specific set of Arabic verses, which are said in the same way all over the world:

God is great  
I bear witness that there is no god but God  
I bear witness that Muhammad is God's Messenger  
Come to prayer, Come to prayer  
Come to success, Come to success

God is great, God is great  
There is no god but God

*(English translation to the Arabic call)*

### **The five prayers per-day**

The five daily prayers are conducted at fixed times of day and in specific ways. They take place at dawn, noon, afternoon, dusk, and night. They are usually conducted alone, in private or at the mosque, but are sometimes carried out together in large groups, especially at the Friday noon prayer. All five daily prayers involve standing, sitting and bowing according to an exact pattern. Each cycle of standing, sitting and bowing is known as a prostration or Raka'h. At the dawn prayer, worshippers complete two prostrations; at noon, afternoon and night prayers four prostrations are required; and at sunset three are made. No matter what a Muslim person's language is, the five daily prayers are made in classical Arabic (the original language of the Qur'an), and are uttered to oneself and not spoken aloud. The eyes are kept open, looking straight ahead. Men and women say the prayers in exactly the same way. They do not take long to perform, the longest taking no more than 10 - 15 minutes.

### **The steps of a daily prayer**

1. Standing up, the worshipper declares his/her intention to pray to God the prayer for that time of day. Then he/she acknowledges that God is great: {Allah-u-Akbaf). Then God is praised and thanked for his Majesty, and sought as shelter from Satan. The first chapter of the Qur'an 'Fatiha' is recited with another short chapter. Then the worshipper bows and declares 'God is mighty' three times.
2. The worshipper stands again and recites a verse acknowledging that God listens to those who praise Him.
3. Then he/she kneels down and touches the ground with the forehead, declaring that 'God is the Highest' three times. Sitting upright, he/she acknowledges that God is great. The genuflecting (touching the ground with the forehead) is repeated a second time saying 'God is the highest' three times.
4. Then he/she stands up, marking the end of the first prostration. The second prostration starts with God being declared great, then the 'Fatiha' is recited with a second short chapter from the Qur'an.
5. Steps Steps 4-9 are repeated as many times as required, depending on which of the five prayers is done. On completing the required number of prostrations, the worshipper, in the seated position, recites verses stating that 'there is no god but God and Muhammad is his Messenger'. Finally there is a request to God to bestow his blessing upon the Prophet and his descendants, the good worshippers, and Abraham and his descendants.
6. The worshipper then turns to the right saying: Peace be upon you and thanks be to God for his blessings. This is repeated to the left. The prayer is then complete.

### **A word on ritual ablutions**

Before each of the five prayers, the worshiper has to conduct the ritual ablutions 'wodhu', to be spiritually and physically clean enough to conduct the prayers. These ablutions also follow a strict pattern and order adhered to by all Muslims. The main steps consist of washing the hands and wrists, rinsing the mouth, cleaning the nose by inhaling water into the nostrils, washing the face, the arms and elbows, wiping the front of the head above the forehead, cleaning the ears, and washing the feet and ankles.

### **Some prayers and supplications**

- In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful. Praise be to God, Lord of the Universe, the Compassionate, the Merciful, Sovereign of the Day of judgement! You alone we worship, and to You alone we turn for help. Guide us to the straight path, the path of those whom You have favoured, not of those who have incurred Your wrath, nor of those who have gone astray.' (Qur'an, Chapter 1, Surat Al-Fatiha)

- Abraham said to God: 'Our Lord, make us submissive to You, and of our descendants a people submissive to You; and show us our religious rites, and forgive us, for You are the Forgiver, the Merciful.' (Qur'an, Chapter2, verse 128)
- Moses prayed to God: 'O my Lord, relieve my bosom of its concerns, ease the task at my hand, and remove the impediment from my speech, so that others may understand what I say.' (Qur'an, Chapter20, verses25-28)
- Muhammad said: In Your Name, O Lord, I lay my side to sleep, and by Your leave I raise it up. If You take away my soul during sleep forgive it; and if You send it back protect it as You protect Your pious servants.<sup>1</sup>
- O God, make me content with Your judgement, make me patient in the face of Your tribulation, and imbue me with gratitude for Your blessings. I beg You to grant the perfection of Your blessing, the permanence of Your gift of well-being, and the maintenance of Your love.<sup>2</sup>
- O God, if I worship You in fear of hell, burn me in it. If I worship You in hope of paradise, exclude me from it. But if I worship You for Your own sake, do not deny me Your everlasting beauty.<sup>3</sup>

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1 - Selected Prayers, Jamal Badawi, Millat Book Centre, New Delhi, India.

2 - By the ascetic Ibrahim ibn Ad'ham, died ca. 782AD; translated by Muhtar Holland, in: Utterances of Shaikh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, Al-Baz Publishing, Houston, Texas, 1992.

3 - By Rabia Al-Adawia, 81<sup>st</sup> century Sufi saint; from Prayer & Reflection, published by An-Nisa Society, London, c.1996.)