

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Recommended Lecture Content: Isra and Mi'raj and the Importance of visiting Masjid al-Aqsa

سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي أَسْرَى بِعَبْدِهِ لَيْلًا مِّنَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ إِلَى الْمَسْجِدِ الْأَقْصَا
الَّذِي بَرَكْنَا حَوْلَهُ لِنُرِيَهُ مِنْ آيَاتِنَا إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ ﴿١﴾

Exalted is He who took His Servant by night from al-Masjid al-Haram to al-Masjid al-Aqsa, whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him of Our signs. Indeed, He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing. (Surah Isra: 1)

The event of Isra and Mi'raj is one of the most notable occasions in the Sirah of the Prophet Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم and a testimony to Nabi صلى الله عليه وسلم lofty spiritual status. During this night, the Messenger of Allah صلى الله عليه وسلم traversed from Makkatul Mukaramah to Baytul Muqaddas and from there traversed onwards to the Heavens, having direct contact with Allah, thereafter returning to Makkatul Mukaramah via Masjid al-Aqsa, all in the same night. Isra refers to the leg of the journey from Makkah to Baytul Muqaddas on the Buraq, accompanied by Sayyidina Jibra'eel عليه السلام. Mi'raj refers to the ascension from Masjid al-Aqsa to the Heavens. The entire journey occurred for the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم in body and spirit in a full state of wakefulness.

The Isra and Mi'raj is generally associated with the month of Rajab, and in particular the 27th night of this month. It should be borne in mind that this date is far from conclusive as historians have mentioned Rabi-ul-Awwal, Rabi-u-Thani, Ramadan or Shawwal as equally potential months wherein the journey transpired.

As far as the year when Mi'raj occurred is concerned, a variety of opinions have been recorded, ranging from the fifth to the twelfth year of Prophethood. Many scholars lean towards the conclusion that it occurred closer to the period of the Hijrah to Madinah.

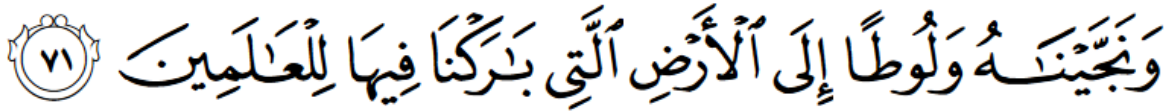
As lofty as the events of Mi'raj are, the night was not singled out for Ibadah or any special observances by the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم and his companions رضي الله عنهم. As such, in remembering the Isra and Mi'raj at this time, we simply recount its events and seek to imbibe its lessons.

The Isra and Mi'raj and Masjid al-Aqsa

The events of the Isra and Mi'raj are numerous as are the lessons that can be drawn from them. In this khutbah, we focus specifically on how this journey relates to Masjid al-Aqsa and emphasises its significance.

1. Visit to al-Aqsa a gift and means of honour

This journey occurred at a very trying time in the life of the Prophet ﷺ. Persecution of the fledgling Muslim community at Makkah was unrelenting. The Prophet ﷺ lost his most dear supporters – his uncle Abu Talib and beloved wife Sayyidah Khadijah رضي الله عنها. To add to the sorrow, the people of Taif whom he chose to convey his message to, hopeful for a different response to that encountered in Makkatul Mukarramah, drove him out of their town most shamefully. Coming in this context, the visit to Masjid al-Aqsa and beyond was a means of Allah تعالى و سبحانه revealing to the Prophet ﷺ what glory lies for Islam beyond its present temporary persecution; exhibiting his illustrious following in the universe, regardless of the rejection encountered in Arabia; and increasing his determination to continue the mission. The blessed land of Palestine incidentally played the same role of escape from persecution and inspiring hope for the Prophet's Ibrahim and Lut عليه السلام previously:



And We delivered him and Lot to the land which We had blessed for the worlds. (Surah Ambiyaa:71)

2. Affirming the bond between Masjid al-Haram and Masjid al-Aqsa

Masjid al-Haram is the first House of Allah to have been established on earth. Masjid al-Aqsa is the second, coming into existence just 40 years later. The Isra emphasises this bond between these two Masaajid whose initial builders are said to be one and the same. This link is affirmed in Masjid al-Aqsa being the first qiblah for this Ummah prior to the re-orientation to Makkatul Mukarramah. There is also the implication here that any threat to Masjid al-Haram is a threat to Masjid al-Aqsa and vice versa.

3. Emphasising the blessedness of the land

The opening Ayah of Surah Isra draws attention to Masjid al-Aqsa being a hub of barakah (blessings). This barakah manifests itself in both the spiritual and worldly spheres in a variety of ways. This barakah 'radiates' from Masjid al-Aqsa to the surrounding lands. Ahadeeth identify the wider Shaam region surrounding Masjid al-Aqsa as being blessed and highly significant in Islam.

4. The Buraq Wall – A part of Masjid al-Aqsa

فَرَبَطْتُهُ بِالْحَلَقَةِ الَّتِي يَرَبِطُ بِهَا الْأَنْبِيَاءُ

"..I tethered it [the Buraq] to the ring used by the prophets" (Hadith – Sahih Muslim)

Upon arriving at Masjid al-Aqsa, the Prophet ﷺ tied the Buraq to a boundary wall of the Masjid, where other prophets too had tied their conveyances. This wall is today

known by Jews and the Western Wall or Wailing Wall and is claimed to be the remnant of an ancient Temple. But to Muslims it is the Buraq Wall – a waqf, due to it being part of the Masjid, whose Muslim ownership has been confirmed by international commissions as well.

5. Clarification of what constitutes Masjid al-Aqsa

Allah سبحانه و تعالى describes the Isra as having occurred from Masjid al-Haram to Masjid al-Aqsa. None of the major structures present today at al-Aqsa were in existence at the time of Mi'raj. This effectively debunks notions that either the Jami al-Qibli (with black dome) or Qubbah as-Sakhrah (with gold dome) represent Masjid al-Aqsa in its totality. The correct understanding is that **all that is contained** within the walls of the al-Aqsa compound (144 000 m²) is **Masjid al-Aqsa**. It is the land of the Masjid that is inherently blessed, and all historical structures derive their significance therefrom.

6. The place where Nabi ﷺ chose the natural way for his Ummah

فَجَاءَنِي جِبْرِيلُ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ بِنَاءٍ مِنْ خَمْرٍ وَإِنَاءٍ مِنْ

لَبَنٍ فَأَخْتَرْتُ اللَّبَنَ فَقَالَ جِبْرِيلُ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ أَخْتَرْتَ لِفِطْرَةِ

"..Jibra'eel brought me a vessel of wine and a vessel of milk. I chose the milk, and Jibra'eel said: You have chosen the fitra (natural way)..." (Hadith – Sahih Muslim). This famous and highly symbolic incident occurred at Masjid al-Aqsa.

7. The Congregation of the Prophets

Masjid al-Aqsa is the only known place on earth where every single Prophet that graced this earth performed Salaah in one place at the same time. This illustrious congregation was led by none other than the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and was a practical manifestation of his status as Imamul-Anbiyaa (Leader of the Prophets). It is for this reason that Sayyidina Ibn Abbas رضي الله عنه has said about al-Aqsa: *"There is not a single inch in Bayt al Muqaddas where a Prophet has not prayed or an angel not stood."* The leading of the Salaah by the Prophet ﷺ also signified a shift in the spiritual leadership of mankind from Bani Isra'eel to Bani Isma'eel - represented by Sayyidina Muhammad ﷺ and those who believe in him.

8. Gateway to the Heavens

It is most significant that Allah سبحانه و تعالى chose Masjid al-Aqsa to be the station from which Sayyidina Muhammad ﷺ ascended to the Heavens, when in His infinite Power the same could have been achieved directly from Makkatul Mukarammah. This emphasises the centrality of al-Aqsa, and it is for this reason as well as the ascension of Sayyidina Isa عليه السلام from al-Quds even prior, that scholars have referred to Masjid al-Aqsa as the 'Gateway to the Heavens'. Muslims gravitate towards al-Aqsa and al-Quds to draw closer to al-Quddus – Allah سبحانه و تعالى

9. Importance of Salaah in seeking Divine Assistance

يَتَأَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا اسْتَعِينُوا بِالصَّبْرِ وَالصَّلَاةِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَ الصَّابِرِينَ ﴿١٥٣﴾

O you who have believed, seek help through patience and prayer. Indeed, Allah is with the patient. (Surah Baqarah: 153)

Masjid al-Aqsa was the first place on earth to have encountered the gift of 5 daily Salaah, upon the return of Sayyidina Muhammad ﷺ from the Heavens. Every Salaah we perform should remind us of our connection to Masjid al-Aqsa. At the same time, this connection between al-Aqsa and Salaah should serve as a reminder that, as we employ many legitimate means to assist Masjid al-Aqsa and its people, we should prioritise prayer and appreciate Salaah as a potent means to draw Divine assistance and solve all our problems.

10. Multiple visits to al-Aqsa

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ visited Masjid al-Aqsa prior to proceeding to the Heavens as well as on his way back. In addition, Allah afforded him a visualisation of al-Aqsa when he returned to Makkatul Mukarammah whereby he was able to answer the detailed questions on the structure of the Masjid being posed to him by the Quraish.

All the above features of the Isra and Mi'raj affirm for Muslims the status of Masjid al-Aqsa and should serve to deepen the sense of love and attachment believers possess for the Masjid and its surroundings.

It is worthwhile noting that whilst the Isra and Mi'raj undoubtedly represents of the greatest incidents to transpire at al-Aqsa, it is not the sole reason why Muslims revere the Masjid, nor does the Muslim attachment to the Masjid begin from its occurrence. The Muslim link to al-Aqsa originates from the time of its consecration as the second Masjid on earth; acknowledges the link to the Masjid by other previous Anbiyaa; encompasses the glorious events in the era of Sayyidina Muhammad ﷺ; and will endure in holding significance and being the site of epochal events right until the End of Time.

Importance of visiting Masjid al-Aqsa

1. A Sunnah and source of reward

Of the responsibilities of Muslims towards Masjid al-Aqsa, one of the most critical is visiting this blessed Masjid. This duty is emphasised in the Ahadeeth:

Sayyidah Maymunah bint Sa'd رضي الله عنها relates that she asked the Prophet ﷺ, "O Prophet ﷺ! Inform us about Bayt al-Maqdis"? He said, "Visit it for prayer". She further asked, "If one of us cannot visit it, what should we do"? He said, "If you cannot go for prayer then send some oil to be used in its lamps; whosoever gives oil for its lamps, will be as if he has prayed in it". (Musnad Imam Ahmed)

Visiting is a responsibility that exists for Muslims irrespective of whether adverse political conditions or oppression reign at al-Aqsa or not. The primary reason for such visits is to please Allah تعالى و سبحانه and accrue the spiritual rewards promised for performing Salaah here.

Sayyidina Abu Hurayrah رضي الله عنه relates that the Prophet ﷺ said, "You should not undertake a special journey to visit any place other than the three Masajid with the expectations of getting greater reward: the Sacred Masjid of Makkah, this Masjid of mine, and Masjid al-Aqsa". (Sahih al-Bukhari)

Sayyidna Abu Darda رضي الله عنه relates that the Prophet ﷺ said, "A prayer in Makkah is worth 100000 times, a prayer in my Masjid (Madinah) is worth 1000 times, and a prayer in al-Aqsa is worth 500 times more than anywhere else". (Tabarani)

Visiting al-Aqsa is also encouraged for the purpose of using it as a station from which to embark upon Hajj or Umrah:

Umm Salamah, Umm al-Mu'minin رضي الله عنها, relates that the Prophet ﷺ said, "If anyone puts on ihram for Hajj or 'Umrah from the Masjid al-Aqsa and then proceeds to the sacred Masjid, his former and latter sins will be forgiven, or he will be guaranteed Paradise". The narrator 'Abdullah doubted which of these words he said. (Sunan Abu Dawud)

A Hadith mentions certain special duas Sayyidina Sulaymaan عليه السلام made whilst **reconstructing** Masjid al-Aqsa, whose blessings even contemporary visitors can share in:

Sayyidina Abdullah ibn Amr رضي الله عنه narrates that the Prophet ﷺ said: "Sulaymaan, son of Dawood) prayed for three things from Allah, the Mighty and Glorious, when constructing Bayt al-Maqdis: (i) the ability to decide cases in accordance to the Will of Allah, which was granted to him; (ii) a kingdom the like of which would be given to no one after him, which was also granted; and (iii), after finishing the construction of the masjid he prayed, 'May anyone who comes to this masjid solely for the purpose of praying in it be delivered from all his sins as on the day his mother gave birth to him'" (Nasa'i)

It is narrated of Sayyidina Ibn Umar رضي الله عنه that, in pursuit of the rewards mentioned in the aforementioned Hadith, upon completion of his devotions at al-Aqsa, he would not even drink the water of al-Quds or engage in any further activity there for fear of exceeding the conditions specified.

Motivated by a desire to earn these rewards and derive benefit from its blessedness, Masjid al-Aqsa was frequented by numerous Sahabah رضي الله تعالى عنهم and has played host to many saintly personalities and general Muslim worshippers through the ages.

2. Showing solidarity with the Palestinians

عَنْ النُّعْمَانَ بْنِ بَشِيرٍ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ مَثَلُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ فِي تَوَادُّهِمْ وَتَرَاحُمِهِمْ وَتَعَاطُفِهِمْ مَثَلُ الْجَسَدِ إِذَا اشْتَكَى مِنْهُ عُضْوٌ تَدَاعَى لَهُ سَائِرُ الْجَسَدِ بِالسَّهْرِ وَالْحَمَى

Sayyidina Nu'man ibn Basheer رضي الله عنه reported: *The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, "The parable of the believers in their affection, mercy, and compassion for each other is that of a body. When any limb aches, the whole body reacts with sleeplessness and fever." (Sahih al-Bukhari)*

Masjid al-Aqsa is the focal point of the Palestinian struggle against dispossession, occupation and apartheid, and Palestinians – especially Jerusalemites – are the first line of defence for the Masjid. It is a common sentiment of Palestinians that the best means for fellow Muslims to assist them is to visit Masjid al-Aqsa and wider Palestine.

Such visits expose the traveller to the realities of Occupation and provide the impetus to become an ambassador for the cause upon returning to one's home country. Critically it is a means of conveying to Palestinians that they are not alone in the struggle to maintain the Holy City's authentic identity. These visits lift their spirits and spur them on to continue resisting and yearning for justice.

Palestinians, especially Jerusalemites, also find themselves under great financial strain due to the policies of Occupation. Visiting is a golden opportunity to support the local Palestinian economy as well as to contribute to Masjid al-Aqsa and its people.

3. Warding off danger and maintaining a Muslim presence

Al-Aqsa fi Khatar (Al-Aqsa is in Danger) is not simply a slogan, but the **daily reality** facing the Masjid. Al-Aqsa faces plans to divide it spatially between Muslims and Jews. There are also suggestions to apportion specific prayer times for Muslims and Jews within the compound. Beyond this, the Zionist Temple Movement ultimately seeks to destroy structures at Masjid al-Aqsa and extend full control of the site in order to establish a Temple.

To complement this vision, settlers are now making provocative visits seeking to assert ownership of al-Aqsa in ever increasing numbers almost every day. 2015 Israeli Police statistics showed that Jewish visitation to al-Aqsa increased some 92 percent since 2009.

A record number of Jewish settlers - 2593 – made provocative visits to al-Aqsa over the recent Passover period, reflecting an 89% increase in the same period from last year.

An Israeli attorney who works with the Temple Movement recently stated that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu will have to approve prayer for Jews at al-Aqsa when their number of visitors surpasses 100 000 a year. This means no more than 300 Jews on average each day.

Concurrently, Palestinian visitation to al-Aqsa continues to be severely curtailed by Israel with authorities only allowing Muslims meeting very narrow criteria in terms of age, gender and residency status to enter. Palestinians who live barely a few minutes or kilometres away from Masjid al-Aqsa may never get to enter the Masjid in their lifetimes.

The Apartheid Wall, expanding Jewish settlements, house demolitions, banning orders, permits and checkpoints too are together keeping yet more Palestinians out. And in the wake of the Trump administration's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, legislation, demographic engineering and archaeological efforts to erase Muslim heritage from al-Aqsa are now all proceeding at break-neck speed.

Since such a limited number of Palestinians are allowed to visit al-Aqsa and hardly any Muslims from the Arab World are able to visit, a special responsibility is consequently placed on Muslims from South Africa, the United Kingdom, Turkey and other Muslim-minority countries to visit, in order to uphold a Muslim presence particularly in al-Quds and al-Aqsa. From South Africa, no visas are required and travel arrangements can be made easily.

Visiting entails one simply travelling to the Masjid, enjoy its spiritual fruits and interacting with its people! Being a holder of a foreign passport and a peaceful traveller largely immunises one from any adversarial encounters with soldiers of authorities.

Performing I'tikaaf in Ramadan at Masjid al-Aqsa is a truly memorable experience that is open to all. Beyond Ramadan, visitation is required throughout the year – from families, youth, Ulama, Umrah travellers, researchers, professionals and more.

Visiting Masjid al-Aqsa is a responsibility we should all take seriously. More than much else, what al-Aqsa needs right now **is simply our presence!**

May Allah سبحانه و تعالى increase our love and yearning for Masjid al-Aqsa. May He allow us all to visit its blessed environs before our deaths. May He ease the suffering of its people. And may we see its freedom in our lifetime. Aameen

This khutbah is prepared by the Palestine Information Network (PIN) in the interests of enhancing education on Masjid al-Aqsa and Palestine. 

For updated news on Masjid al-Aqsa as well as a repository of informative resources on Masjid al-Aqsa, visit www.masjidalaqsa.net or @firstqiblah on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. For practical guidelines on travelling to al-Aqsa or performing I'tikaaf there, visit www.aqsa.co.za or www.visitmasjidalaqsa.com

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