

The Whispered Prayers of Imam al-Sajjad, Part I

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Abstract: *Munajāt* 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 (*munajāt*). 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 *munajāt* and some of its instances in the Qur’an

The Arabic words *munajāt* 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 *munajāt* does not involve speaking secretly and whispering, rather it is a

conversation away from others.¹ Accordingly, *munajāt* is more in line with speaking softly than speaking loudly and shouting. Hence, reciting *munajāt* (fervent prayers to God in solitude) handed down to us from the Ahlul-Bayt or reading poems composed by some in their *munajāt* to God is not considered *munajāt*. Rather they are regarded as reading a *munajāt* because in supplication one composes and recites a prayer to ask God for something, and reciting prayers handed down to us from the Ahlul-Bayt 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.

Munajāt means telling a secret or speaking privately. There can be *munajāt* (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,

*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.*²

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

² The Qur'an, 58: 9.

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا تَنَاجَيْتُمْ فَلَا تَتَنَاجَوْا بِالْأَلْسِنِ وَالْعُدْوَانِ وَمَغْصِبِ الرُّسُولِ وَتَنَاجَوْا بِالْإِزِّ وَالنُّتْوَى وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي إِلَيْهِ تُحْشَرُونَ

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 and spoke to him, and bothered him to gain an opportunity or a position and to be cherished and acceptable by others, God said:

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.³

Prior to the revelation of this verse, the rich in Medina constantly came to the Prophet 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, with the poor being excluded from this rule, nobody but Imam Ali was willing to talk to the Prophet. He sold a dinar for 10 dirhams and for 10 days whenever he was to speak privately to the Prophet, he paid one dirham as alms.⁴ In the end, when Muslims refused to speak to the Prophet for the fear of paying alms, God abrogated the ruling of paying alms and said:

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,

³ The Qur'an, 58: 12.

⁴ Huwayzi, *Tafsir Nur al-Thaqalayn*, vol. 29, p. 299.

*and obey Allah and His Apostle. And Allah is well aware of what you do.*⁵

***Munajāt* to God in hadiths and the conduct of the religious**

In our religious custom and literature, *munajāt* 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 *munajāt*, *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 *Munajāt al-Sha'baniyyah*, all three words *du'a*, *nida*, and *munajāt* are used, and the Infallible Imam said:

⁵ The Qur'an, 58: 13.

أَسْأَلُكُمْ أَنْ تَقْدِمُوا بَيْنَ يَدَيَّ جَوَازِمَ صَدَقَاتٍ فَإِذْ لَمْ تَفْعَلُوا وَتَابَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكُمْ فَأَقْبِمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَأَتُوا الزَّكَاةَ وَأَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ وَاللَّهُ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ

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.⁶

Prophet Muhammad was quoted as saying that Prophet Moses said in munajāt 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.”⁷

In another narration, Imam Ali said about some virtues of the month of Ramadan and munajāt during it:

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 munajāt receives the Divine attention and mercy.⁸

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

⁶ Mafatih al-Jinan, *Munajāt al-Sha'banniyah*, وَأَسْمَعُ نِدَائِي إِذَا نَادَيْتَكَ وَأَقْبِلْ عَلَيَّ إِذَا نَاجَيْتَكَ
⁷ Hurr Amili, *Wasa'il-u-Shi'a*, vol. 1, the sections on Rulings of Solitude, section 7, p.311, Hadith no. 820.

يَا رَبِّ أْبَعِيدْ أَنْتَ مِنِّي فَأَنَا ذِيكَ أُمُّ قَرِيبٍ فَأَنَا جِيبِكَ فَأَوْحَى إِلَيَّ اللَّهُ أَنَا جَلِيسٌ مِّنْ ذَكَرَنِي؛
⁸ Shaykh Saduq, *Fadai'la al-Ashhur al-Thalathah*, p. 109.
 بَيِّنْ أَيْهَا الصَّائِمُ فَإِنَّكَ فِي شَهْرِ صِيَامِكَ فِيهِ مَفْرُوضٌ وَتَسْكُ فِيهِ تَسْبِيحٌ وَتُؤْمَكُ فِيهِ عِبَادَةٌ وَطَاعَتُكَ فِيهِ مَقْبُولَةٌ وَذُنُوبُكَ فِيهِ مَغْفُورَةٌ وَأَصْوَاتُكَ فِيهِ مَسْمُوعَةٌ وَمَنَاجِيكَ فِيهِ مَرْخُومَةٌ

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 munajāt and its effects during these special days. Of course, according to some narrations, apart from the blessed Month of Ramadan and special times, munajāt is significantly important at certain times like at dawn when it receives special attention of God. Imam al-Sadiq says:

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.’⁹

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

⁹ Muhadith Nuri, *Mustardak al-Wasa'il*, vol. 5, p. 207.

وَأَنَّ الْعَبْدَ إِذَا تَخَلَّى بِسِتِّدِهِ فِي جَوْفِ اللَّيْلِ [الْمُظْلَمِ] وَتَأَجَّاهَ أَثَبَّتَ اللَّهُ النَّوْزَ فِي قَلْبِهِ، فَإِذَا قَالَ: يَا رَبِّ يَا رَبِّ، نَادَاهُ الْجَلِيلُ جَلَّ جَلَالُهُ: لَيْتِكَ عِبْدِي سَلْبِي أَعْطَيْكَ وَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَيَّ أَكْفِكَ. ثُمَّ يَقُولُ جَلَّ جَلَالُهُ لِمَلَائِكَتِهِ: يَا مَلَائِكَتِي، انظُرُوا إِلَى عِبْدِي فَقَدْ تَخَلَّى بِي فِي جَوْفِ اللَّيْلِ الْمُظْلَمِ وَالْبَطَّالُونَ لَاهُونَ وَالغَافِلُونَ نِيَامَ اشْهَدُوا أَنِّي عَفَرْتُ لَهُ

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 *munajāt*, 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 *munajāt* and private conversation with God are referred to. For example, Prophet Muhammad related a Divine Hadith as follows, “Whenever I see a servant often pondering on Me, I make him interested in requesting Me and doing *munajāt* to Me.”¹⁰

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 *munajāt* and conversation

¹⁰ Muhammad Bāqir Majlisi, *Bihar-ul-Anwar*, vol. 93, section 13, p. 162, Hadith no. 42.

إِذَا عَلِمْتُ أَنَّ الْعَلْبَ عَلَى عَبْدِي الْإِسْتِغَالَ بِي تَقَلَّتْ شَهْوَتُهُ فِي مَسْأَلَتِي وَمُنَاجَاتِي

with Him to such an extent that his greatest desire is munajāt 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 munajāt to God.

Factors that deprive one from whispering to God

Considering the greatness of munajāt 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:

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.)¹¹

About Prophet David, it is said that God addressed him, saying, “My friend should not endeavour nor grieve for this world because this will take the sweetness of munajāt to Me away from his heart.”¹²

The one who is attached to this world should not expect to have satisfaction in munajāt 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 will enjoy whispering to Him.

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

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 munajāt to Me.¹³

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, vol. 74, section 30, vol. 30, p. 6.

يا أحمد لو صَلَّى العبدُ صلاه أهل السماء والأرض ويصومُ صيامَ أهل السماء والأرض ويَطْوِي مِنَ الطَّعامِ مِنلِ الملائكةِ وَلَبَسَ لباسَ العاري ثُمَّ أَرَى فِي قَلْبِهِ مِنْ حُبِّ التَّوْبَةِ ذَرَّةً أَوْ سَمْتَعَهَا أَوْ رِئاسَتَهَا أَوْ حَلِيهَا أَوْ زِينَتَهَا لَا يَجَاوِزُنِي فِي دَارِي وَلَا يَزِعُنِي مِنْ قَلْبِهِ مَحَبَّتِي وَلَا أَطْلِمُنِي قَلْبُهُ حَتَّى يَنْسَانِي وَلَا أَدِيقَهُ حَلَاوَهُ مَحَبَّتِي

¹² *Op. cit.*, vol. 82, section 61, vol. 143, p. 26.

¹³ Kulayni, *Kāfi*, vol. 1, section al-Musta'kil bi 'Ilmihi wal-Mubahi bih, p. 46, Hadith no. 4.

لَا تَجْعَلُ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكَ غَلِيلاً مَفْتُوناً بِالدُّنْيَا فَيُضِدَّكَ عَنْ طَرِيقِ مَحَبَّتِي، فَإِنَّ أَوْلَيْكَ قُطَاعَ طَرِيقِ عِبَادِي المُرِيدِينَ. إِنَّ أَدْنَى مَا أَنَا صَاحِبُهُمْ أَنْ أَنْزِعَ حَلَاوَهُ مُنَاجَاتِي عَنْ قُلُوبِهِمْ