

In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

The Necessity of Community Formation in the West

Arman Rahmim

One plus one is quite more than two.

There is something about a community that is vastly more than a collection of individuals. This short writing intends, by the will of God Almighty, to focus on this issue, especially in the context of living in the West. We begin from an unlikely point. The Holy Qur'an teaches us:

إِنْ تَجْتَنِبُوا كَبَائِرَ مَا تُنْهَوْنَ عَنْهُ نُكَفِّرْ عَنْكُمْ سَيِّئَاتِكُمْ وَنُدْخِلْكُمْ مُدْخَلًا كَرِيمًا

If you shun the great ones (sins) which you are forbidden from, We will do away with your misdeeds and cause you to enter an honorable place of entering. (4:31)

This blessed verse, and two other ones that emphasize distancing oneself from great sins (42:37; 53:32), must raise one's curiosity, because the reward appears to be God's encompassing forgiveness of all sins. In other words, while active sincere seeking of forgiveness is commonly recognized as a means to have one's errs and shortcomings forgiven, there appears to be another gate to this end. And this then naturally raises the question as to what the major sins are.

Before this, we first emphasize three things:

(1) It appears from narrations that if one commits a major sin, even if admitting its serious nature, one exits the fold of belief (*Imaan*). And in fact, if one commits it, considering it to be lawful, one exits the fold Islam [1].

(2) A minor sin, when repeated, becomes a major sin. As narrated from the Blessed Prophet - peace be upon him and his progeny:

لا كبيرة مع استغفار و لا صغيرة مع إصرار

There is no major sin with seeking of forgiveness and there is no minor sin with insistence. [2]

(3) A comprehensive and certain listing of all major sins is actually not known. Scholars have explained this, with analogy to the night of *Qadr* in the Month of Ramadan and the uncertainty associated with its time, in the sense that people do not approach minor sins readily.

Having said these, there are narrations that explicitly spell out sins that are major. For instance:

The seven [major sins] that necessarily bring about [the Fire] are: (1) slaying the forbidden soul, and (2) breaking (the right/commandment/heart of) the parents, and (3) consuming usury, and (4) deserting after migration, and (5) slandering against the chaste woman, and (6) consuming the wealth of the orphan, and (7) fleeing the battle. [3]

What we wish to focus on is the fourth item mentioned above. It is very interesting that the English language resembles the Arabic language in the relation between the verb ‘to desert’ and the desert itself. ‘Ta’arrub’ (تعرّب) (‘to desert’) after migration is literally related to becoming ‘A’raabi’ (اعرابي); i.e. residing in the desert. In its original Islamic application, this concept referred to those who had migrated to Medina al-Nabi, i.e. ‘the City of the Prophet’, but who later abandoned him and his teachings and returned to the desert. In the following eras, this was taken to indicate living in a land in which one abandons divine teachings. For instance, this is certainly applicable to an individual who moves to a land where practicing one’s faith is not possible. In fact, another narration recounting the major sins is concluded by saying that “ ‘Ta’arrub’ and polytheism (*shirk*) are the same!” [4]

More sublimely, *ta’arrub* can refer to the *condition* of one who acquires a knowledge, an understanding, an enlightenment, and abandons it (e.g. in favor of worldliness and pleasures). **What the present writing claims is that this term is potentially applicable to those who live in the West but are not part of a community of believers.**

We begin by the saying of the Commander of the Faithful, Imam Ali - peace be upon him:

وَ الزُّمُومَا السُّوَادَ الْأَعْظَمَ فَإِنَّ يَدَ اللَّهِ مَعَ الْجَمَاعَةِ وَ إِيَّاكُمْ وَ الْفُرْقَةَ فَإِنَّ الشَّادَّ مِنَ النَّاسِ لِلشَّيْطَانِ كَمَا أَنَّ الشَّادَّ مِنَ الْغَنَمِ لِلذَّنْبِ

Accompany the great crowd; for indeed Allah’s hand is with the congregation. And be utterly wary of standing aloof! For the one deviated (and distanced) from the people is for Satan as (a sheep) deviated from the herd is for the wolf. [5]

A blind man came to Allah’s Apostle and said, “O Allah’s Apostle! I am blind, and it happens that I hear the call (to prayer) but do not find one to guide me to the congregation and the prayer with you.” So the Prophet said to him, “Stretch a thread from your house to the mosque and attend the congregation!” [6] When a blind man living and breathing in the Prophet’s community is still commanded to attend the Muslim congregation, it follows most emphatically how incumbent it is on those of us living in the West to build and consistently attend our own congregations! God Almighty says:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اصْبِرُوا وَصَابِرُوا وَرَابِطُوا وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ

O ye who believe! Persevere in patience and constancy; vie in such perseverance; strengthen each other; and fear Allah; that ye may prosper. (3:200)

This blessed verse advises four things. First of all, two kinds of patience have been prescribed: *sabr* (اصبروا) and *musaabirah* (صابروا). One is patience on its own, and one, in relation to others (based on the verb form ‘*mufaa’ilah*’ in Arabic, indicating mutuality). This has been interpreted as observing patience individually as well as collectively as a community together. Furthermore, the blessed verse prescribes *muraabitah* (رابطوا) which is also from the same kind of verb form (‘*mufaa’ilah*’), again indicating mutuality. The root word *rabt* means to tie (e.g. as used in *ribaah* for the “roadside inn” (caravansera) as camels were tied to them, or as used for “ligaments” connecting bones to one another). This term is also used for protecting boundaries, e.g. a border patrol person is referred to as *muraabit* since his job is to tie and close off the boundaries. The blessed Qur’anic verse appears to advise us to not be merely patient

personally, and to not be merely patient collectively, but to be together and connected in general (e.g. even in moments of happiness and celebration; in general through the various phases of life). Furthermore, all these should be in the path of *taqwa* and piety (انتقوا) as mentioned in the fourth point.

Seen another way, the second kind of patience has also been interpreted to mean patience in response to outside forces and plots. Thus the believers ought to be patient in general (اصبروا), and to be patient in the face (صابروا) of adversaries who patiently plan and execute, so the believers protect and safeguard their boundaries (رابطوا), all consistently in the path of piety and righteousness (انتقوا), so they may succeed and prosper together (لعلكم تفلحون); no where in the Qur'an does it mention "that you may prosper" in the singular tense).

Another very important advice appears in chapter 103 of the Blessed Qur'an:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
وَالْعَصْرِ * إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَفِي خُسْرٍ * إِلَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ
In the Name of Allah, Most Compassionate, Most Merciful

(I swear) by time, * Most surely the human being is in loss, * Except those who believe and perform good deeds, and enjoin on each other truth, and enjoin on each other patience.

The human being, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, is in loss. The only exception is for those who believe. But even that belief is not protected except if put in practice through good deeds. And even the individual good deeds are not protected, except if the believers form a circle, and enjoin on one another to subscribe to the truth. And even that is not protected, except if this circle of believers enjoin on one another to be perseverant and patience in the path of truth. For when one subscribes to the truth, one becomes a target by Satan, and his army, and cannot be victorious except by God's will and through His commandments, one of which is to be utterly wary of standing aloof and to situate oneself within the congregation.

Finally, we note that the necessity of having strong support is such that Lot - peace be upon him - sorrowfully wished for it against his people. In the face of the intrusion of his sinful people against his guests, when he became utterly hopeless of having anyone within them to stand up, he said:

قَالَ لَوْ أَنَّ لِي بِكُمْ قُوَّةً أَوْ آوِي إِلَىٰ رُكْنٍ شَدِيدٍ

"Would that I had power to suppress you or that I could betake myself to a strong support."

(11:80)

While Lot's people came to his doorsteps, in today's world, disbelief and indecency has officially *entered* people's homes through cable and air (!). And while it is very important to understand, lobby for and implement ways to resist and tackle this, it is becoming increasingly impossible to *fully* insulate oneself and one's family and youth from being exposed. The strongest recourse to this is to put one's complete and utter trust in God Almighty, to believe that everything is in His hands, and to immerse oneself in a community of believers that actively subscribe to His will and commandments.

Being part of a community of believers can enrich one's faith and life in numerous way, which includes being provided with peer-support against outside pressures, benefiting from the presence and guidance of spiritual mentors and role models, receiving constructive feedback to constantly improve one's character, and suppression of one's ego, which is the way to monotheism, by being immersed in loving care for others (see article [7] on this topic). There are narrations in which it is discouraged for one to eat alone, live alone or travel alone [8]. It was narrated that "Indeed, Satan, the most severe of what he intends and advances against the human being is when he is alone, devoid [of the presence of others]." [9] Or for instance, it was narrated from the Blessed Prophet who advised Imam Ali, "Do not depart for travel you alone, for indeed Satan is with the single one, and he from two is more distant ... " [9]. Similarly, as a believer journeys through life, he needs the accompaniment of fellow believers, the importance of which cannot be overstated.

Finally, we note that being part of *any* congregation and community is not sufficient at all. Rather, as noted in the commentary following the blessed verse 3:200, this should occur in the path of piety and righteousness. In fact, the Blessed Qur'an clearly states:

وَاعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا

And hold fast, all together, by the rope of Allah (which he stretches out for you), and be not disunited.

(3:103)

Thus, the right community, even if consisting of few members, is one which has come together around the path which God Almighty has stretched out to mankind, which includes the teachings of the Blessed Prophet, as left behind to us through the two greats weights (*thaqalayn*). And we also note that the blessed Qur'an strictly advises the Blessed Prophet, and thus his followers, to "never stand" even in a mosque set-up "to cause harm and for unbelief and to cause disunion among the believers" (9:107-108).

Overall, it is incumbent upon the believers to actively pursue formation of strong, energetic, nourishing congregations of piety and guidance, and to emphasize community formation at least as much as they do so for specific religious rituals and deeds, for the former safeguards the latter, and is a part of our faith.

We ask God Almighty to shower us with His blessings.

References:

[1] *Al-Kaafi*, vol. 3, p. 382, Sec. "Major Sins", hadith 10.

[2] *Nahj al-Fasaahah*, hadith 2508. Also narrated from Imam Saadiq - peace be upon him, in reverse order (*al-Kaafi*, vol. 3, p. 395, Sec. "Insistence upon the Sin"; *Wasaa'il al-Shia*, vol. 15, vol. 338, hadith: 20681).

[3] *Al-Kaafi*, vol. 3, p. 378, Sec. "Major Sins", hadith 2.

عَنْ ابْنِ مَحْبُوبٍ قَالَ كَتَبَ مَعِيَ بَعْضُ أَصْحَابِنَا إِلَى أَبِي الْحَسَنِ عَ نَسْأَلُهُ عَنِ الْكَبَائِرِ كَمْ هِيَ وَ مَا هِيَ فَكَتَبَ الْكَبَائِرُ مَنْ اجْتَنَبَ مَا وَعَدَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ النَّارَ كَفَرَ عَنْهُ سَيِّئَاتِهِ إِذَا كَانَ مُؤْمِنًا وَالسَّبْعُ الْمُوجِبَاتُ قَتْلُ النَّفْسِ الْحَرَامِ وَ عُقُوقُ الْوَالِدَيْنِ وَ أْكُلُ الرِّبَا وَ التَّعَرُّبُ بَعْدَ الْهَجْرَةِ وَ قَدْفُ الْمُحْصَنَاتِ وَ أَكْلُ مَالِ الْيَتِيمِ وَالْفِرَارُ مِنَ الرَّحْفِ

In other narrations, disappointment from God's mercy and perception of immunity from God's plotting have also been mentioned, amongst other. See other narration in this section of *al-Kaafi*.

[4] *Al-Kaafi*, vol. 3, p. 382, Sec. "Major Sins", hadith 14.

[5] *Nahj al-Balaaghah*, sermon 127.

[6] *Al-Tahdhib*, vol. 3, p. 266:

أَتَى رَجُلٌ أَعْمَى رَسُولَ اللَّهِ (ص) فَقَالَ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ إِنِّي ضَرِيرُ الْبَصَرِ وَرُبَّمَا أَسْمَعُ النَّدَاءَ وَ لَا أُجِدُّ مَنْ يَقُودُنِي إِلَى الْجَمَاعَةِ وَالصَّلَاةَ مَعَكَ فَقَالَ لَهُ النَّبِيُّ ص شَدَّ مِنْ مَنْزِلِكَ إِلَى الْمَسْجِدِ حَبْلًا وَ اخْضُرِ الْجَمَاعَةَ

[7] A. Rahmim, "To God through His Creation".

[8] For instance, see *Man-laa-Yahtharah-ul-Faqih*, Book of Hajj, Sec. "Discouragement of being alone in travel", vol. 3, p. 150.

[9] *Wasaa'il al-Shia*, vol. 3, p. 381. Narrated from Imam Mohammad al-Baaghir - peace be upon him - who said:

إِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ أَشَدُّ مَايَهُمْ بِالْإِنْسَانِ حِينَ يَكُونُ وَحْدَهُ خَالِيًا؛ لَا أَرَى أَنْ يَرَقُدَ وَحْدَهُ

[10] See ref. 8; narrated from Imam Musa al-Kaadim - peace be upon him - who said that this was amongst the advise (وصيه) of the Messenger of Allah - peace be upon him and his progeny - to Ali - peace be upon him:

لَا تَخْرُجْ فِي سَفَرٍ وَحْدَكَ فَإِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ مَعَ الْوَاحِدِ وَ هُوَ مِنَ الْإِثْنَيْنِ ابْعَد