

With Allah

Shawwal 1445/May 2024
Letter No. 11, Amman, Jordan

Dear Believers: as-Salamu ‘alaykum wa rahmatu Llahi wa barakatuh.

In the Name of Allah Most Merciful and Compassionate: All praise to Allah for His infinite blessings on us all, and the true height of Iman; and blessings and peace on His Prophet Muhammad, who cast out the blind night of this world with the light of Islam.

To commence: Allah has raised the worth of every Muslim by the prayer and greeting he exchanges with every Muslim, as He commands us in verse 4.86 of Surat al-Nisa’:

وَإِذَا حُيِّتُمْ بِتَحِيَّةٍ فَحَيُّوا بِأَحْسَنَ مِنْهَا أَوْ رُدُّوهَا إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ حَسِيبًا

And when you are given greetings of peace,
return an even better,
or the like of it;
Verily Allah was ever
over everything an infallible reckoner.

The verse before this one deals with *shafa’a hasana* or ‘stepping in to join others upon good,’ as we discussed in Letter No. 8 this February. Abu Su‘ud says here that the context of this verse is “guidance [from Allah] to repay the person who steps in or intercedes with another for one’s sake, and how one can fully repay him, since the greeting of Islam [*as-Salamu ‘alaykum* or ‘Peace be upon you’] from a Muslim is an intercession (*shafa’a*) by him for his brother with Allah Most High.” That is, *as-Salamu ‘alaykum* or “Peace be upon you” is actually a prayer to Allah by the person who says it, interceding with Allah for the one he gives this greeting to. So the recipient is duty-bound by Allah in this verse to pay him back the favor, by answering him with a prayer—*Wa ‘alaykum as-Salam* or “And upon you be peace”—to Allah for *him* in return. Ibn ‘Ashur notes that this reply, *Wa ‘alaykum as-Salam*, is actually more emphatically polite than even the initial greeting, since the syntax or ‘word order’ of putting *Wa ‘alaykum* or “And upon you” first, before *as-Salam* or “peace,” gives greater importance to the person thus addressed (and upon *you*) than the initial greeting—Allah thus teaching us how to show other Muslims our greatest respect and finest manners. This *du’a* or ‘prayer’ for the person one greets is also an assurance of peace and safety (*salam*) from one’s taking anything of his that Allah has made inviolable, for the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) has said, “All of the Muslim is unlawful to another Muslim: his blood, property, and reputation” (*Muslim*, 4.198 (2564). S). And when the Sahaba asked the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace), “What Islam is best?” he told them: “His whom Muslims are safe (*salima l-Muslimun*) from his tongue and his hand” (*Bukhari*, 1.10 (11). S). All of which is of Allah’s surpassing wisdom in giving us the greeting of Salams to each other as Muslims. The Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said, “The nearest of people to Allah is the one who first gives them Salams” (*Abu Dawud*, 4.351 (5197). H).

As for the opening words *Wa idha huyyitum bi tahiyyatin* or “And when you are given greetings of peace,” in the words *huyyitum bi tahiyyatin*, literally “you are greeted with a greeting,” both these greeting words derive from *haya(tun)*, or ‘life,’ since the pre-Islamic greeting was to say *Hayyaka Llah*, or “May Allah give you long life”—but in the Islamic context of this verse of the Quran, the Arabic words for “greeting” are well understood by every Muslim to mean *as-Salamu ‘alaykum* or “Peace be upon you,” as they have been translated above. The word *as-Salam*, literally “peace and safety,” is more than simply a prayer for long life, but for freedom from all troubles soever, whether physical or spiritual, so it already includes the blessing of long life—while a mere prayer for long life does not include these benefits. So Allah has given us a better greeting than was previously used. Abu Su‘ud mentions the unspoken clause that all scholars agree is understood at the end of this first line, namely: “By other Muslims.” For just as one does not give Salams to non-Muslims, neither is it obligatory to respond to theirs.

Then Allah says, *fa-hayyu bi ahsana minha aw rudduha* or “return an even better, or the like of it.” In the word *fa-hayyu* the letter *fa’* not only indicates the consequence (*jawab al-shart*) of the condition given in the first line above, but also contains the connotation of *ta’qib* or ‘immediacy’—to “return an even better [greeting], or the like of it” *directly*—while *hayyu* (greet) is a *command*, and every command of Allah in the Quran is *obligatory* to follow, unless other decisive evidence from Allah or His messenger (Allah bless him and give him peace) indicates that it is *not* obligatory, which is not the case here. The ulema concur that to return the like of it, by saying *Wa ‘alaykum as-Salam* or “And upon you be peace,” is obligatory, while to add something more to this is not obligatory, though it is greater in reward. A well-authenticated (*hasan*) hadith relates that a man came to the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) and said, *as-Salamu ‘alaykum* or “Peace be upon you,” and the Prophet returned the man’s greeting, and the man sat down [with others there]—then he [the Prophet] said: “ten.” Then another man came and said *as-Salamu ‘alaykum wa rahmatu Llah* or “Peace be upon you and the mercy of Allah,” and again he returned the greeting, and the man sat down—then he said (upon him be blessings and peace): “twenty.” Then yet another man came and said *as-Salamu ‘alaykum wa rahmatu Llahi wa barakatuh* or “Peace be upon you and the mercy of Allah and His many blessings,” and he again returned the greeting, and the man sat down—then he said: “thirty” (*Ahmad*, 33.170 (19948). H). The best way is to give Salams to begin with as the latter person did, with the full form. This is the most perfect way, and comprises within it every tremendous blessing, since *as-Salamu ‘alaykum* or “Peace be upon you” means

freedom from every harm in this world and the next; *wa rahmatu Llahi* or “and the mercy of Allah” means attaining all possible benefits; and *wa barakatuh* or “and His many blessings” means they not only last but ever increase. Also, one must answer right away, and with *words*, not merely waving with the hand, putting the hand over one’s heart, nodding, or something else, for the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said, “Do not give the Salams of the Jews and Christians: for their ‘giving of Salams’ is with hands, heads, or making a sign” (*Nasa’i: ‘Amal al-yawm wa al-layla*, 118–19 (342). H).

Ulema agree that to return Salams is obligatory, but differ in some details as to how the obligation is to be fulfilled. Hanafis and Shafi’is hold that to first greet another Muslim with Salams is a *sunna*, and rewarded as such for the one who first greets the person or group with Salams; while returning Salams is a *fard kifa’i* upon everyone who has heard the greeting: meaning that if nobody who heard it returns the person’s Salams, all are guilty of serious sin. The “returning of the Salams” is not valid unless the person who first said them *hears* the response. Other details are found in the fiqh book *Reliance of the Traveller*, pages 768–69. Malikis hold that to first greet other Muslims with Salams is a *sunna kifa’iyya*, meaning rewarded as a *sunna* if any member of one’s party greets the person with them; while returning Salams is a *fard kifa’i* upon everyone who has heard the greeting: meaning, as with the Hanafis and Shafi’is, that if nobody who heard it returns the person’s Salams, *all* are guilty of the sin. The person giving the greetings says *as-Salamu ‘alaykum* or “Peace be upon you,” using the plural *you* (*‘alaykum*) not the singular (*alayka*), even if addressing a *single* one person, since there are always protecting *angels* around one, as Allah says: “Each has succeeding shifts of angels ever-compassing him round, fore and aft, who watch over him by the command of Allah” (Quran 13.11). One must say *as-Salamu ‘alaykum* and not merely *Salamu ‘alaykum*. The person returning the Salams must say *Wa ‘alaykum as-Salam* or “And upon you be peace,” in which the *wa* or “and” is used to acknowledge that one has received the first person’s blessing and greeting. As in the initial greeting one must say in return *Wa ‘alaykum as-Salam* or “And upon you be peace,” and not just *Wa ‘alaykum salam*, leaving the last word indefinite. If greeted with a longer form of Salams, it is permissible to reply with a shorter, though Malikis hold this is offensive (*makruh*).

When Allah says *aw rudduha* “or the like of it,” it means to return the same words or their equivalent by saying *Wa ‘alaykum as-Salam* or “And upon you be peace,” plus any of the above additions initially given to one. It is *sunna* for someone walking to first greet someone sitting, the younger to greet the older, and the smaller group to greet the larger. One does not greet a member of the opposite sex except one’s spouse or close unmarriageable kin (*mahram*). Ibn ‘Ashur says that Allah taught us this Islamic greeting—with its obligatory reply, plus a little better than it—to supplant the custom of the *Jahiliyya* or ‘pre-Islamic pagan period of ignorance’ in which the notables of the society were given one greeting, and the ordinary people a different one.

Then Allah says, *Inna Llaha kana ‘ala kulli shay’in hasiba(n)* or “Verily Allah was ever over everything an infallible reckoner,” meaning, according to Raghīb al-Asfahani, the One who shall requite you, without mistake, for everything you have done—including, Ibn ‘Ashur notes, your greetings and responding to those of others. So this verse ends in both *targhib* or Allah’s ‘encouragement’ to gain the immense reward of this greeting and prayer for others, or merit of an even better response—and as well His *tarhib* or ‘threat against’ not answering others’ Salams. The *Inna* or “Verily” and *kana* or “was ever” strengthen both of these meanings by emphasizing that Allah’s reckoning with us has been fixed and appointed from beginningless eternity. May Allah open the doors of His illimitable benefit to us through spreading this greeting to every quarter of the world, and in the next world forever and ever, when the keepers of paradise tell us, “All peace and safety be upon you; You proved pure and good, so enter it, ever to abide” (Quran 39.73).

Question of the Month: I find that the Muslim community in this prison has a black national perspective. Most are African Americans. I’m Spanish, and sometimes feel excluded from the community. Does nationalism that involves excluding other Muslims have a benefit?

Answer: Race is not an issue in Islam because it is impossible for anyone to choose his parents, and Allah, who is just, judges us solely by our own choices. Allah says: “Verily the greatest of you all in the sight of Allah is the most godfearing of you. Verily Allah is all-knowing, all-aware” (Quran 49.13). At the same time, because Allah is all-knowing and all-aware, He honored the Arabs by making the Final Revelation in their language; made the best of mankind, Muhammad (Allah bless him and give him peace), of their race; and chose them among other peoples—because of their native courage, valor, honor, loyalty, generosity, fighting ability, leadership, and other traits—to lead the Umma in spreading the religion in the opening centuries of Islam. Every person has genetic advantages and disadvantages, while the *din* of Islam calls for a return to the *fitra*, or ‘primal human nature from Allah Himself to know and worship Him.’ Many Muslims of African descent are aware that their ancestors were *ulema*, *mujahidin*, and *salihin* (righteous), so they see Islam as a return to their national identity, and I see nothing wrong with this. But the point is *Islam* or ‘submission to Allah,’ and a hope to equal or better the level of *din* of one’s forebears. The true Muslim takes pride in nothing but Allah, and his whole concern is for the entire Umma, all Muslims, not his own particular genetic advantages over others, because no one chooses one’s parents but the One who created us all, which entails *thanks* to Him, not pride in oneself.

Till next letter, Allah willing, greetings of peace and felicity to everyone; *was-Salamu ‘alaykum wa rahmatu Llahi wa barakatuh*.