

Eating and Social Relations

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 21 May 2021

لَيْسَ عَلَى الْأَعْمَى حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى الْأَعْرَجِ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى الْمَرِيضِ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَنْ تَأْكُلُوا مِنْ
بُيُوتِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ آبَائِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ أُمَّهَاتِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ إِخْوَانِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ أَخَوَاتِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ
أَعْمَامِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ عَمَّاتِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ أَخَوَاتِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ خَلَتِكُمْ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْهُنَّ مَفَاتِحُهُ أَوْ
صَدِيقِكُمْ لَيْسَ عَلَيْكُمْ جُنَاحٌ أَنْ تَأْكُلُوا جَمِيعًا أَوْ أَشْتَاتًا^ط

“There is no blame on the blind man, nor any blame on the lame, nor blame on the sick, nor on yourselves that you eat in your own houses, or your fathers’ houses, or your mothers’ houses, or your brothers’ houses, or your sisters’ houses, or your paternal uncles’ houses, or your paternal aunts’ houses, or your maternal uncles’ houses, or your maternal aunts’ houses, or (houses) of which you possess the keys, or your friends’ (houses). It is no sin in you that you eat together or separately.” —ch. 24, v. 61

As in my last *khutba* I dealt with some aspects of the teachings of Islam about food and eating, I will say more today on the same theme. This verse tells Muslims about people regarding whom they should have **no qualms** in eating with them. As to the meaning of the opening words of this long verse, “There is no blame on the blind man, nor any blame on the lame, nor blame on the sick”, different opinions have been expressed. Some say that Arabs of that time used to be too embarrassed to eat with such people because they were concerned that they themselves would be able to pick out and take with their hands the best of the foods presented before them, but a blind person, or disabled or sick would lack the ability to reach and take the good parts. In those days food was eaten from one large dish with people sitting around it. Even today, if there was a buffet, any blind or less physically able person would not be able to serve himself like the others. And such people may themselves feel that if they asked anyone for assistance they would be a nuisance and cause inconvenience to others. There is another opinion, that Arabs of that time were too proud to have such

people sitting and eating in their company, as if they were not equal to them. Whatever the reason might be, this verse says that there is no blame on the blind and the lame and the sick if they eat with you. They are not a source of embarrassment or discomfort for you, nor does their presence bring down your status in society. If they ask you for help in being served with food, no blame should attach to them, neither in your eyes nor in their eyes. It is not as if they are being lazy or arrogant and expecting others to serve them.

The meaning of these words “there is no blame on the blind...” can be extended in modern times to include the case where such a person inviting the able-bodied to eat with him. Many such people nowadays live independently, cook and can act as hosts. One should have no hesitation in accepting their invitation, and not think that you will be a burden on them, or that they are incapable of being good hosts.

These words may also be extended to apply not only to the physically disabled, but to all those who are looked down upon in society, the socially less able. There are some religious communities in this world whose higher-ranking members look down upon certain classes in their own communities and believe that the foods these higher-ups themselves eat are too holy and sacred to be given to the so-called lower people, and that the foods which these people eat are not fit and religiously clean enough for the self-styled higher ones to eat. The Quran repudiates all such notions. All people may eat together and share the same foods. We are also familiar with societies in which the domestic servants, who cook and serve the food, can never sit at the same table as the householders and eat with them. Eating together is not just consuming food while sitting together, but it also a powerful socialising activity bringing people together in a harmonious relationship. It is a recognition that others are connected to you and are your co-equal members of the community.

But why is it then stated that there is no blame on you to “eat in your own houses, or your fathers’ houses, or your mothers’ houses, or your brothers’ houses, or your sisters’ houses” and uncles’ houses and aunts’ houses”? Obviously there cannot be any blame on you to eat in your own house! What is meant is that just as you can eat

in your own house, you can with the same informality eat in the houses of the various close blood relatives mentioned here. This had to be said because, earlier in the same chapter, the Quran had taught respect for privacy of all others, saying: “O you who believe, do not enter houses other than your own houses, until you have asked permission and greeted their inhabitants” (24:27) and also just before this verse it had emphasized privacy of husband and wife from the close ones within the home itself (24:58–59). The Companions of the Holy Prophet, who strictly followed the Quran, then thought that they have to observe formality with their closest relatives as well. So this verse says that this should not be taken too far, so that you behave like strangers with close relatives, but that informal social relations must be maintained with them.

It is noticeable that this verse mentions your seniors in the family hierarchy (i.e., father, mother, uncles, aunts) and your equals (brothers and sisters), that you can eat in their houses. It doesn't say, by name, that you can eat at houses of your sons, daughters, blood nephews, and blood nieces, i.e., those who are junior to you in the family hierarchy. Of course, this is implied also. But this verse mentions the rights of juniors in the family which they may claim upon their seniors. This may be because the seniors are in a position of authority and they command respect, and are able to exercise their rights anyway. So it seems to me that the Quran specifically mentions the rights of the juniors upon their seniors in order to show that it supports those in society who are lower down the ladder.

Another noticeable point is that the blood relatives listed here, as having houses where you may eat, **are both males and females in an equal manner**. It clearly shows that women can own or have control and use of property just like men. Just as your father has a house that can be called his house, this verse expects that your mother too has a house that can be called her house, and it might well be the same one. Traditionally, in all societies, Muslim or non-Muslim, the house was owned only by the father, where your mother lived as well. This verse envisages a situation where a house can be called your mother's house. It does not necessarily mean that she owns or has use of a separate house in her own right. The most common situation is that the father and the mother live in one house. What the verse indicates is that the mother

has as much right of use of that house as the father, even if the father is the only owner (or rent-payer) of the house.

Again, the verse mentions the houses of your sisters, your father's sisters and your mother's sisters. But they might be married and living in the houses of their husbands. So, as in the case of the mother, these females also have a right over the houses in which they live, even if owned by their husbands. You can go and eat informally without formal invitation in, say, your sister's house, and your *khala's* house, and your *phophi's* house (as we call them in Urdu), and their husbands cannot prevent you. In brief, Islam envisages that a woman must always have a house that can be called **her** house, whether she owns it or not.

Another point arising from this verse, which Hazrat Maulana Nur-ud-Din used to mention, is that it envisages close relatives living in their own houses, and not together in one house. He said in one of his Quran teaching sessions that in our society much of the friction and discord you commonly see between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law is due to living together in one house.

The verse goes on to say that you can eat in houses “of which you possess the keys” or houses of your friends. If you have been entrusted with looking after a house by its owner, so that you have been given its keys, you may reasonably eat in there or under certain conditions consume food left by the owner. In the Holy Prophet's time sometimes when people went on war expeditions they asked someone to look after their house during their absence. In a reasonable way, that person could eat the food left in the house, if, for example, it would go bad by the time the owner returned. The Quran is here removing any feeling of guilt in consuming such food.

In fact, much of this verse is about removing people's unnecessary feelings of guilt and inhibitions about where to eat and with whom to eat. Lastly, it says: “It is no sin in you that you eat together or separately.” Some people at that time would always wait for someone to join them before they would eat. But this verse recognizes that there can be occasions when you may have to eat separately on your own, or perhaps you wish to do so. Basically the verse says: Mix with people if you like, maintain your

separateness if you like, but don't go to an extreme of either disregarding the privacy of others or remaining always aloof from them. During the strict lockdown phases of this pandemic, each household, and in fact many an individual, has been forced to eat on their own without anyone else being allowed to join.

Praise be to Allah Who has revealed a Book which gives us guidance in all conditions that we may find ourselves in!

بَارَكَ اللهُ لَنَا وَتَكْمَلُ فِي الْقُرْآنِ الْعَظِيمِ، وَنَفَعَنَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ بِالآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ، إِنَّهُ تَعَالَى جَوَادٌ كَرِيمٌ
مَلِكٌ بَرٌّ رَوْوْفٌ رَحِيمٌ-
