

Q: When we follow the Imam in salah, we are supposed to make an intention that we are doing so. Do we make this intention verbally or in the heart or just stand which will become the symbol of our intention to follow the Imam?

A: A lot of misunderstanding seems to be concerning niyyah or intention in salah. People think if they do not actually say the set words of niyyah before starting to offer their salah, their salah will not be valid. This is not correct. Niyyah means the intention of the heart. When a person is going to offer his salah in a congregation behind an Imam, it is not necessary that he should say this in words. The formal set of words used 'to form' an intention should not be taken to mean that salah will not be established if these are not repeated verbally. This notion is incorrect. Think of a person who joins the congregation with the Imam going for Ruku'(bending position) and while he is still standing and struggling with the formalized words of intention, the Imam rises from the Ruku' So, as I said earlier, this formal verbalization of the words of intention is not necessary at all.

The same is true about the intention (niyyah) of keeping a fast. I get a lot of telephone calls at the time of suhur (sehri: pre-dawn snacks in Ramadan) telling me that something terrible has happened to the caller. When I ask him as to what it could be at this hour, he would say that he has eaten his suhur but forgot to make the intention to keep the fast. When I ask, "Why did you eat your suhur on this dawn of Ramadan?" - the answer is, "To fast". I ask, "How is it that you made no intention then?" The answer is, "Well, Sir, I did not say the words of intention," that is, "I intend to keep the fast of the month of Ramadan for tomorrow"). So, all this formalism is wrong- Niyyah, is the intention of the heart. Therefore, anyone standing behind an Imam to offer his salah, for all practical purposes, intends in his heart that he is going to follow the Imam.

Contemporary fatawaa