

Map quest: Candy box directions

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [February 12, 2008](#) issue

A friend stopped by the other day having just come back from Iran. She brought with her a gift of sweets from the Iranian city of Qom. The only English on the box was an address in case I might want to drop in during a future visit to Qom. It reads:

After the Gas Station,
Arak Road, Qom, Iran

That address sounded cozy and chummy, like a small town in Iowa. It did not match my image of Qom. When Scott Appleby and I were studying militant fundamentalisms, we isolated Qom as a center of Shi'a militancy. There are more seminaries there (52 of them) than you would find in Chicago, Boston, New York, San Francisco or other academic-clustering cities in the United States. Qom is a city of more than a million people.

The candy box directions matched the formula we used in giving directions in Battle Creek, Nebraska (pop. 700). "Oh, you pass the Lutheran Church and then turn left at Doering's drug store, watch for a stump on the right side, turn where the train station used to be and . . ."

Would such an approach work for Qom? How could I find the candy maker on Arak Road? Which gas station? And doesn't "after" depend on which way I am traveling? As I sucked some rock candy, I wondered: can "after the gas station" be a formal post office address? Would MapQuest be of any help?

The holy rock candy city of Qom lists 194 sites of significance, among them Mar'ashi Najafi Library and the headquarters of the Ayatollah Khomeini, after whom one of those many seminaries is named. Recently the city made news when Interior Minister Mostafa Pourmohammadi advocated *sighehs*, which are sanctioned "temporary marriages" to be preferred over prostitution or extramarital sex. Young men by the hundreds of thousands cannot afford to marry, he explained. With *sigheh* a couple could be "married" for minutes or months, and then go separate ways. The interior minister said, "Temporary marriage is God's rule. We must

aggressively encourage that.” A lawyer, Nemat Ahmadi—perhaps he is the James Dobson of Shi’a Iran—opposes the practice, but it could be put into effect against his will, since it is, according to the minister, God’s rule.

How would this work, I wonder. Would there be Las Vegas-type marrying chapels? How would the bridal parties find one—perhaps “after the gas station” on some road or other? Even if it is God’s rule, *sigheh* is not needed in America. We already have it. Just read the celebrity pages. No need to risk not being able to find Arak Road.

The pseudonymous Simeon Stylites (Halford Luccock), who wrote this page of the Century for decades and into the 1950s, regularly reported on activities and conversations at a local landmark he called “St. John’s-by-the-gas-station.” Seniors, I mean *really confused* seniors, sometimes still congratulate *me* for a column they remember by Luccock, always mentioning “St. John’s-by-the-gas-station.”

Have conversation-friendly gas stations of the sort Simeon Stylites visited gone the way of phone booths and typewriters? Who could picture parsons chatting about God at a modern self-service operation on a toll road oasis or at some megastation off Exit 298? Today church names are more like Placid Pond Worship Center or Roaring Gorge Community Gathering Place. Good luck trying to find them. But I can tell you where to find superb rock candy next time you are on Arak Road in Qom; it’s “after the gas station.”