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Ramadan: The Noble Guest

By Abdullah bin Hamid Ali

Time is a gift bestowed whose greatest import is hidden in the opportunity to become acquainted with the Creator through the experiences of life and its vicissitudes. Allah has arranged the believer's devotional activities with an interesting relationship to time. The performance of the canonical prayers, the harvest for alms-giving, the season of the pilgrimage, and the fast of the month of Ramadan; all find their legal significance within time's receptacle. In one sense, it can be said that time is life's host; conferring upon it every hospitable treatment and at other times serving to it a not so delightful dish only to finally escort us to and out its door. This interpretation would make Ramadan, as a particular of the genus of time, a host as well. A good guest who expects to be invited again to the home of a gentle host would do well to make good preparations in one's attire, appearance, and perhaps learn the most important etiquettes for greeting that dignified host.

In another sense, Ramadan is not a host. It is, rather, a guest. The host is the human soul given the opportunity to receive such good company. It is important, likewise, for that host, if he wants to have the honor to entertain such company in the future, to prepare well by ensuring that his home (read, 'the heart') is clean, presentable, aromatized, and that the delicacies served are memorable. No one would like to offend an honored guest to the point that he grows averse to one's company, or even be given reason to consider publicizing the mishaps of his host.

Ramadan is known as the month of generosity (karam); the month of patience (sabr); the month of altruism (ithar) and consolation (muwasat). It is related that the Companion, 'Abd Allah b. 'Umar—Allah be pleased with him and his father—used to go out during the nights of Ramadan before breakfast in search of

indigent people to whom he could give food to eat; also with whom he could break fast and share their company.¹ Part of this was largely since he understood that one of the messages Ramadan inspires to the wakeful heart is the message of need. This month reminds us of our needy state. We need food and drink. But, others need it also. It reminds us that we are weak and are in need of our Creator.

Ramadan is also known as the month of the Qur'an, since it was during this month on the Night of Power that the Qur'an was dislodged from the Guarded Slate (al-lawh al-mahfuz) upon which the destinies of all things are recorded that is situated at the foot of the Heavenly Throne, and delivered in its totality to the House of Might (bayt al-'izza) located in the lowest Heaven.² To hear, listen to, or recite the Qur'an are all considered acts of worship. The Qur'an is a book that consists of over 321,000 letters.³ For each letter that a devotee recites, there is a minimum of 10 good deeds. Good deeds are multiplied even further during this blessed month.

The Qur'an was revealed as guidance for humanity in hopes that they would become more conscious of Allah. God-consciousness is achieved by the fulfillment of commandments as well as the avoidance of prohibitions. All of the Abrahamic faiths acknowledge in some form the concept of *imago dei* or the idea that God created man in His image. While mainstream Islamic doctrine opposes the idea of crass anthropomorphism and that man is a literal reflection of a corporeal composite God, it does find reconciliation with moral deification.⁴ In other words, while it is both

¹ Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali reports: "Ibn 'Umar used to fast and break his fasts with the poor folk, and whenever his family (read 'wife') prevented him from going out to them he did not eat dinner that particular night." (al-Hanbali, Zayn al-Din Ibn Rajab, *Lata'if al-Ma'arif fi ma li Mawasim al-'Am min al-Waza'if*, Mu'assasat al-Rayyan/Dar Ibn Hazm: Beirut, 1414/1993: p. 188)

² *Al-Mustadrak li al-Hakim*: 2/368

³ Ibn Kathir, Isma'il, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim*, Mu'assasat al-Kutub al-Thaqafiya: Beirut, 1416/1996, 1/7

⁴ What is meant by 'deification' in this sense is becoming more like God; not as a physical materialization. Rather, it relates to the metaphorical connection between the qualities

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rationality and religiously inconceivable for Allah to be incarnate within the boundaries of creation, it would not be blasphemous for one to surmise that the human being in many ways shares an abstractive resemblance to Allah. Put plainly, a person achieves closeness to Allah through emulation of Allah. In fasting, three active qualities of Allah are distinct when a person abandons food, drink, and sexual activity. These acts which are normally lawful—if not essential for life—for believers to carry out become means for approximation with Allah since they mirror acts Allah takes no part in. Similarly, since it is inconceivable for Allah to be guilty of falsehood, treachery, and indecency, the avoidance of such misdeeds during fasts are even more stringently discouraged than they are when one is not fasting. They also help us to achieve the pleasure of Allah.

The Divine qualities are infinitesimal, though some are regal (*sifat al-jalal*). Others are elegant (*sifat al-jamal*). The regal qualities, which are typically attributed to men, are those that inspire fear and awe; qualities found in names such as: The Vengeful, The Omnipotent, The Debaser, and The Harmful. The elegant qualities, typically ascribed to women, are those that inspire amazement and bewilderment; qualities found in names like: The Compassionate, The Reviver, The Bestower of Grace, and The Benefiter. Every person needs a share of both regal and elegant qualities if one hopes to ever achieve full humanity. Since “women are the complimentary halves of men”⁵, men require a sufficient balance of elegance as do women require a sufficient balance of regality. During the month of Ramadan, Allah manifests elegance in

God has and those He has given to his creation. For example, God has will, life, and knowledge. He has also given will, life, and knowledge to the human being. The difference is that God’s qualities are absolute, while those of the human being are limited and defined. Similarly, God is compassionate and kind to His creatures. Human beings are likewise expected to be compassionate and kind in emulation of their creator.

⁵ The Prophet—Allah’s mercy and peace on him—said, “Women are merely the complimentary halves of men.” The hadith is reported by Abu Dawud, Tirmidhi, Darimi, and Imam Ahmad in his Musnad.

preponderance to regality, insomuch that He slams the gates of Hell shut, flings open the gates of Heaven, restrains the demonic forces, frees an undisclosed number of souls from Hell every night, enlivens hearts on the Night of Power, and embraces with mercy all in creation. It is related that even the person who naps during the fast with the intention of continuing one’s nightly worship is given spiritual credit for one’s sleep.⁶

The Qur’an has been characterized as ‘amazing,’⁷ ‘illustrious,’⁸ and ‘noble.’⁹ The most prominent characterization of the holy book, though, is as ‘The Reminder.’ Concealed in this characterization is the concept of ‘nobility’ (*sharaf*); as in Allah’s saying, “We elevated for you your mention”¹⁰ i.e. your nobility. This suggests that a person’s nobility and true dignity rests in the internalization and implementation of the Qur’anic injunctions. For this reason, it is not odd that we find another referred to as ‘The Reminder’ besides the Qur’an. It is the Prophet Muhammad—Allah’s mercy and peace on him. Allah says, “Allah has sent to you a reminder; a messenger who recites to you the signs of God.”¹¹ He was the messenger of mercy; the best in emulation of God and the greatest manifestation of His qualities in human form. That being so, one finds no uneasiness in referring to him as Islam’s *sacra doctrina* i.e. the revealed word of God manifested in the person of Muhammad—Allah’s mercy and peace on him. Did not his wife say of him, “His conduct was the Qur’an” and that “He was the Qur’an walking”?

So while we celebrate guidance during this month and show gratitude for this immense blessing, let us reflect upon the importance of the gift of time and take this opportunity to better acquaint ourselves with our Creator by

⁶ Ibn Rajab al-Hanabli says, “If someone intends by eating and drinking to strengthen his body for standing (in prayer) and fasting, he is rewarded for that. Likewise, if one intends by his sleep during the night and day to muster up the strength to carry out good acts, his sleep is an act of worship. A particular prophetic tradition reads, “the sleep of the faster is worship.” (*Lata’if al-Ma’arif*: p. 175)

⁷ Qur’an 72:1

⁸ Qur’an 85:15

⁹ Qur’an 56:80

¹⁰ Qur’an 94:4

¹¹ Qur’an 65:10-11

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emulating the greatest gift given to us by Him after life and faith: Muhammad—Allah’s mercy and peace on him; the one who said, “I am merely a mercy bestowed.” Keep in mind that we are hosts of a generous guest. Let there be no rush to send that guest on its way.

“Whoever believes in Allah
and the Last Day should
honor his guest.”¹²

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¹² This hadith is reported by Bukhari and Muslim.