

The Day of *Ashura*

10th Muharram

by David (Daud) Sander, Ph.D.

Bismillah Al Rahman Al Rahim [In the Name of Allah, The One Who Acts with Mercy, The Source of Mercy].

All praise belongs to Allah. Allah owns everything. All power belongs to Allah and not to us. May Allah's peace and blessings be on Prophet Muhammad and his family and on all the other prophets and their families.

Muharram 10, 1437 / October 23, 2015
Day of *Ashura*, Day of Fasting and Contemplation

So far in these writings I have been reflecting on holidays as a way of contemplation and time travel. To sum up, if the universe appears as forms emanating from one essence, but separated by time, then the holidays are transformers that collapse or telescope time so we can see aspects of reality more clearly. (Please don't take that statement as necessarily true; reflect and see if you find it helpful.)

The day of *Ashura*, the tenth day of the month of Muharram, is an example.

According to one *hadith*, when the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) emigrated to Medina, he had a conversation with a Jewish person who explained that the Jews were fasting on this day to commemorate Allah's rescue of the Children of Israel through Moses' (peace be upon him) leadership and the miraculous parting of the sea. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) approved of this, replied that his community was linked even closer to Moses, and recommended fasting on this day for his community.¹

To me, this example shows that he integrated positives from the communities and histories around him into the practice of Islam. Like food, stories are even better when shared. His Islam then (and I would say this applies to the development of most world religions in general, when understood honestly) was not some airtight exclusive thing but inclusive, attentive and flexible. When you stand back to look at it, it is composed of many kinds of positive activities undertaken to evoke understanding of *haqq*, the reality of Allah. It allows (and even celebrates) both differences and similarities among people who are holding onto these stories hoping to glimpse Allah's *haqq*.

In the lore of the Muslims there are further associations with this day. You can see from the list below that this day is a *gathering place* of the religions, the prophets, and even the two big historical visions within Islam, namely Shi'a and Sunni.

Adam & Eve forgiven/reintroduced to each other
Noah's ark reached land
Yunus saved from the belly of the fish
Abraham saved from the fire Yusuf and his parents reunited
Ten Commandments given to Musa
Daud forgiven
Jesus raised to heaven
Martyrdom of Imam Husayn at Karbala

I don't know if it is literally true that these dates all correspond on the same humanly

understandable calendar, but to me that is unimportant. The point is that these events gather as images appearing within the lens of a single day. That day, the 10th of Muharram, an ordinary day we can find on our wall calendar, becomes a gathering point of many days, a jewel concentrating and refracting Allah's light, a convergence of frequencies. Looking in this way, we might see more of the whole than our limited vision prevents us from seeing. If we do something to participate, like going without food or drink for a few hours, or cooking a special meal, we might in some way enter the world of that jewel, and inside it, glimpse reality from another scale of reference, in which time as we ordinarily know it fades and there is nothing but the presence of Allah. Unity expressed through diversity and separation.

Which brings me to the final point I would like to examine here. There are many stories of miraculous rescues of prophets and their communities said to coincide with this day, and reunion with their loved ones. What do these stories of mercy and guidance have to do with the last event on the list, the death of Imam Husayn at Karbala? What is this tragedy doing on the same list with the other stories? This is a big question that I would like the reader to contemplate and then if you can, tell me what comes to your heart. For now, one thing coming to my heart is that Karbala represents a turning point in history where people can see clearly that the real leaders of Islam are not the ones striving for prominence in palaces and pulpits. It affirms that those who want to connect with the real leaders have to look below the surface and try to see with their hearts.

And as I said before, holidays are virtual doors opening onto truth, so ultimately we don't need to wait for Ashura to recognize this. It's going on 24/7 and more. The apocalypse is time and eternity coming together. I am reminded of Jesus' (peace be upon him) words, "the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15).

Noah's pudding—an edible version of Ashura! Also known as **Ashura**, it is composed of lots of tidbits of foods that might be stored by someone to survive on a ship, like Noah. A composite of diverse "found materials" that, brought together and cooked by and for hungry people, become unique, delicious, nourishing food. I think in a way it is an image of religion, too.

1/2 cup chickpeas
1/2 cup dried beans, like Navy beans 1 cup coarse bulgur
1/2 cup short grained rice water
1---1/2 cups sugar 1/2 teaspoon salt 1---1/2 cups milk
3/4 cup raisins or white raisins (sultanas) 1/4 cup currants
1/2 cup chopped dried apricots 1/2 cup chopped dried figs
1/2 cup chopped blanched almonds 1/2 cup chopped walnuts
1/4 cup pine nuts 1/4 cup rose water
pomegranate seeds, almonds, or pistachios to garnish

In separate bowls soak the chickpeas and beans in 1-1/2 cups water overnight. Soak the bulgur in 4 cups water and the rice in 1 cup water overnight.

The next day cook the beans and the chickpeas in separate pans in their soaking water until tender, 1-1/2 to 2-1/2 hours.

Put the bulgur with its soaking water in 3 more cups of water in a pan. Drain the rice and add to the bulgur

Cook, uncovered on low heat, for 40-50 minutes.

Add the drained cooked chickpeas and beans and another cup of water to the cooked bulgur and rice mixture.

Leave on low heat for 30 minutes more, stirring occasionally, until the liquid is reduced and the Ashura is thick.

Add sugar, salt, milk, and cook for 15 minutes more.

Stir in fruit and nuts and remove from heat.

Add rose water, stir well, and pour into a large bowl or small individual bowls.

Decorate it with the garnish.

—Recipe from Shaykh Taner Ansari

ⁱSee *Hadith* no. 222 from Al-Bukhari's section on Fasting. Note that there are other *hadiths* saying that Arabs during the time of *Jahiliyyah* (pre-Islamic time of "ignorance") used to fast on *Ashura*, and that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also did so during that time.

Call of the Divine

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Transcriptions: Shaykh Reeyaaz Goolamhossen, Hazmatally Goolam Hossen, Inna Faktorovich, Carol Janan Taylor, Nazeemah Soomar Adam

Holy Days Author: David Sander, Ph.D.