



Our Ramadhan...

With Ramadhan within reach the Muslim world is turned alive and goes through many changes in Ramadhan. Eating, sleeping and socialising routines are turned about. As the sun sets, the first morsels of food enter our mouths after hours of deprivation, usually a sweet date, according to the Islamic tradition. But... are the hours that follow in keeping with the essence of Ramadhan?

Contemporary changes to the Ramadhan culture mean that the spiritual significance of Ramadhan is slowly being lost. Abstaining from physical intake during daylight hours – which means food, drink, and sex – with the intention of getting closer to the Divine, has deep wisdom and meanings.

It allows appreciation of the suffering of the poor and hungry, a chance to devote less time to the physical and more time to the spiritual and a recognition that we can live happily and successfully with less than we have.

But come nightfall, these good intentions are put to one side, as though Ramadhan is for daylight hours only, and the reveling begins.

A lot of time is spent in the kitchen, making it a festival of fine dining, to the point that many Muslims say they actually gain weight rather than lose it, as one might expect. The philosophy of restraint adhered to during the day has its mirror image in the excessive extravagance in indulgence after dark.

One of the religious traditions of Ramadhan is to feed others at the time of iftar in order to gain reward. Dinner invitations thus abound, and iftar gatherings are warm, social events. But in many places they turn into arenas for showmanship, outdoing friends and family with ever extravagant menus.

Sadly today in the Muslim world once the iftar is over, there is a wide choice of entertainment. Those who are extrovert will find their way to newly erected Ramadhan tents, to smoke shisha and chill out with friends for the whole night, going from party to party until dawn. Other families will stay at home to watch the multitude of soap operas which dominate Ramadhan. In Saudi Arabia last year it was claimed that there were 64 such soap operas broadcast each night, staggered over time so audiences could watch as many as possible.

And let's not forget the shopping. Shops are open later than ever, and it seems that Ramadhan is not a time of midnight contemplation, but rather just a prelude to Eid, a day to show off your new clothes. Ramadhan shopping festivals are becoming more common, as is the compulsion to purchase and give Eid presents to a wide circle of acquaintances.

Instead of cutting back on the desire to consume, we end up with heightened consumption in these 30 days, whether that be in restaurants or in retail.

This is not to say that the Muslim world has become a month-long consumerist trend. The social and spiritual temperature of Muslim communities is high and mosques teem with passionate worshippers.

What may surprise many who live in majority Muslim countries is that this sense of community and faith is particularly acute in countries where Muslims are minorities.

In these countries, if you are fasting you have to make an active choice to go against the majority of mainstream society. You still have to go to work where you can stare longingly at your coworkers drinking coffee, or attend meetings which run across the iftar time. You have to really know and understand why you are fasting, rather than just being swept up in the maelstrom. There is a sense of community purpose in these countries and an overwhelming push towards spiritual success.

Ramadhan does not have to be, and should not be, staying away from others and being on your prayer mat. Of course not. Enjoyment, sharing and happiness in our togetherness are critical components of Ramadhan. But Ramadan should be about more than extravagance, shopping and vain entertainment.

So what is fasting all about?....The special nature of fasting is that it creates forbearance and sacrifice. Fasting occurs in the spirit primarily and so it is hidden from all human eyes, visible only to Allah: it is a secret action where one commits himself in maintaining a strong connection and consciousness with Allah. Ones intentions during Ramadhan gives them strength and will power to turn away from lower desires thus liberating them from attachments. One should be engaged as much as possible in the remembrance of Allah(dhikr), reciting and contemplating on the holy Quran, purifying the heart and should distribute as much charity as one is capable of.

Refreshing our rules of Fasting

To perform a fast the following conditions must all be met:

1. The niyyah or intentions to fast, must be made, aloud or silently
2. The period of fast must extend from the time just before sunrise (Fajr) until just after sunset(Maghrib)
3. Whilst fasting , total abstinence from the following is required:
Food, Drink, smoking or consumption of tobacco and sexual activity; nor may one deliberately vomit. Also, any form of negativity, backbiting, fighting, cursing and similar behaviours should be avoided.
4. Pregnant or lactating women, the seriously ill, the aged, and the insane are exempted from fasting, but in some cases may be liable to make up missed days. A woman does not fast on days when she is menstruating, but must make up the missed days. Children under the age of twelve generally are excluded from the fast, but may fast part of the day or for some of the days.

Note: There are certain other special cases which apply to the fasting man or woman, and the advice of a learned practicing Imam(cleric) should be sought to resolve any questions.