

Essays on Faith

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Mahmood Jawaid: A month of fasting and feasting

By

Editor's note: Ramadan is the holiest month in the Islamic calendar and begins this year on August 11. Believers fast until sunset and then break their fast with a communal meal at the mosque. The writer of this essay took a humorous look at his own observations.

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- It was one of the Sundays in the month of Ramadan. Although it is a month of fasting and self-reflection, for most of us it becomes more a month of fasting and feasting. Yes, we fast all day long and then feast all night. While the pious ones adhering to the true spirit of Ramadan succeed in shedding some weight, most of us end up gaining weight. Being Sunday, it was another feast night at the mosque I go to. I pulled into the parking lot. It was crowded. I saw some youths playing bask-football -- a blend of football and basketball. Our youth, being great improvisers, really want to play football, but there is no place to put goalposts in the parking lot. They tackle like football and score touchdowns by placing the football in the basketball hoop. While avoiding getting caught in the tackle, I parked my car and headed to the mosque.

The mosque was full of people. I went through the crowd hugging and kissing. Trust me, at our mosque, we are all straight people. We only exchange hugs and kisses to show our brotherly affection. Notice I did not say sisterly love. No, we don't hug ladies. They are precious. We are very warm-hearted people. We get very excited and give a hard squeeze while hugging. Sometimes I even hear my ribs crackling. We do not want to break our sisters' bones.

As the time for Iftar (breaking the fast) approached, we filled our plates with pakoras (chickpea hushpuppies), chickpea sauté, and fruit chat (spicy fruit cocktail). We all sat on long rows of rectangular tables. The setup looked more like long rowboats ready for an Olympic race. As the time for Iftar got closer, we grabbed dates in our right hand and a glass of juice in our left. When only a minute was left, I placed the dates in between my fingers and lifted my elbow to place the dates about an inch from my mouth, which was now fully open waiting to receive the dates. Luckily, there were no flies around, or they could have wandered into my open mouth and down into my throat. This could have invalidated my fasting, but my eagerness to break my fast as soon as it was possible overwhelmed me.

We were akin to Olympian racers or swimmers as they wait for the gun to go off. As soon as the muezzin (the person making the call for the Iftar) said Al, the dates jumped into our mouths. We did not even wait for him to finish saying Allah-o-Akbar (God is the greatest). After gulping the juice, we were now in attack mode. We started devouring the food, racing to finish our plates. We had only ten minutes to finish the plate and we had not eaten all day. We had to be as fast as possible to eat as much as we could. All the hands were moving in unison. From a distance, the movement of our elbows resembled a well-oiled rowing team at the Olympics.

It was not even ten minutes, or at least that is what I thought, when Hafiz Saheb (the person who has memorized the whole Quran and leads the prayer) made the call for the prayer. I wanted to eat some more pakoras, so before leaving the table, I popped two pakoras in my mouth and grabbed two pakoras in my right hand and two in left. By the time I reached the prayer hall, I had finished four pakoras, but two pakoras were still left in my hand. Although the prayer had already started, I popped them into my mouth anyway. By the time Hafiz Saheb finished reciting Al-Fatiha (first chapter of the Quran, a required reading in each prayer), I had finished the leftover pakoras and joined the congregational prayer. Luckily, Hafiz Saheb kept the prayer very short. I guess he was hungry, too. We then headed to the cafeteria for a second course. The food now consisted of biryani (fried rice mixed with small pieces of beef), chicken tikka (barbeque chicken), karahi gosht (goat meat teriyaki), and eggplant. Once again we were in attack mode. We again had to finish our food in half an hour to go for the second prayer.

While I was still sipping tea, the muezzin called the Adhan (prayer call). I gulped the leftover tea and headed to the prayer hall again. These prayers in the month of Ramadan are really long, lasting almost two hours. I do not mind the obligatory prayer, which is short and takes only about five to seven minutes. It is

the Traweeh (night vigil prayer) that I dread. It almost takes two hours and consists of twenty sets, each set lasting for about five minutes. During these prayers, Hafiz Saheb recites a portion of the Quran at a pace to finish the whole Quran in thirty days.

While the super pious ones go for the whole twenty sets, the averagely pious opt for eight sets. People like me would actually slip out after the obligatory prayer. But being the principal of the Sunday school, I was in an awkward position. I was supposed to set an example for all the children. When I would see my students, I would complete eight sets; otherwise I would rocket out of the mosque after the obligatory prayer. If I slipped out after the obligatory prayer, I would avoid making any eye contact. Any eye contact and I would have been doomed for at least eight sets. Thanks to their excessive homework in the school, there usually would not be many children during weekdays, and I would manage to slip out after the obligatory prayer. Since that night was a weekend night, there were many children and I had no choice but to offer eight sets. As soon as the eighth sets ended, I was out of the Prayer Hall. In fact I was already at the door when I said my second Salam (the prayer ends with turning the head to the right and then to the left while saying Salam).

As the luck would have it, as I stepped out of the Prayer Hall, I ran into one of my students. He was going back to the prayer hall after refreshing his 'wudu' (ablution). He said, "Uncle, are you leaving so soon?" I lied and said, "No I had to make a phone call." I faked a phone call and with great reluctance went back. The pakoras and chickpeas were causing turmoil in my stomach. I looked around. My students were still there. I had no choice but to hold on till twenty sets.

Finally, around eleven in the night, the prayers ended. I was tired, but twenty sets of standing, bowing and prostrating had created some space in my stomach, so I stuffed it with party leftovers and headed home and hit the sack. I got up again around five in the morning and had another mini-feast till the dawn struck. Now that I was well satiated, I was ready to face the world without food and drink till sundown. Actually, I was also supposed to abstain from lying, cheating, badmouthing, backbiting, lewdness and vulgarity. Well, food and drink is one thing. At least I can compensate for it by feasting in the night, but stay away from badmouthing, backbiting and profanity. You must be kidding! Are we angels? And that is not for one or two days but thirty straight days; not only days, but nights also. If Adam and Eve could not stay away from the forbidden fruit, how could I?

Jawaid is the author of "Secrets of Angels, Demons, Satan and Jinns -- Decoding Their Nature through Quran and Science" and "Atom to Adam -- How, When and Where in the Light of Quran, Bible and Science (A Study of Human Origin)," both published by InstantPublishers.com (<http://instantpublisher.com/>) and "Lessons from the Qur'an," published by Ta-Ha Publishers (<http://www.taha.co.uk/>). These books are available from Amazon.com (<http://www.amazon.com/>) and Ta-Ha Publishers (<http://www.taha.co.uk/>), respectively. He is also a chemical engineer with master of science degrees in chemical engineering and chemistry and has a professional engineers license from the State of Texas. His e-mail address is mnajaw...@yahoo.com.