Ramadhan Awareness

Ramadhan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. It is the month during which Muslims observe fasting from morning twilight (Fajr Prayer) to the evening twilight (Maghreb Prayer). The term Ramadhan is literally driven from al-Ramd which means 'burning heat of the sun'.[1] It is believed that this name is given to the fasting month due to the thirst experienced during fasting.

It is narrated from the Prophet of Islam (S) that the name is given to the fasting month because fasting burns the sins. [2] According to some narrations 'Ramadhan' is one of the Names of Allah and hence the more appropriate way to refer to the month of fasting is to say "The Month of Ramadhan", not Ramadhan.[3]

We should however bear in mind that the term 'Ramadhan' without the prefix 'the month' is mentioned in many Hadiths with reference to the month of fasting. Hence, it seems the recommendation for the expression of 'the month of Ramadhan' is with respect to the Qur'anic expression as mentioned in Surah 2, Ayah 185, and as an honour to this holy month, which is referred to in the words of the Prophet (S) 'the month of Allah'.

Significance of the Month of Ramadhan

Ramadhan is the holiest month in the Islamic calendar. Fasting is prescribed in this month. It is a month in which the holy Qur'an was revealed [2:185]. According to some traditions 'the Scriptures' of Ibrahim, the Torah of Moses and the Psalms of David (peace be upon his pure progeny and all the previous prophets) were all revealed in the month of Ramadhan.

It is narrated from Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s): "Verily, the month of Ramadhan is a month in which the holy Qur'an was revealed. It was in this month that the Prophet of Islam was infirmed of being a Prophet. The Night of al-Qadr which is better than one thousand months and therein every matter of ordainments is decreed[4] is in this month."[5]

The Benefits of Fasting

Fasting is an obligation in Islam not an option. It is one of the five pillars on which Islam is built. The benefits of fasting are manifold. Fasting has personal, social, hygienic and best of all spiritual benefits.

Hisham Ibn Hakam asked Imam As-Sadiq (a.s) about the reason(s) because of which fasting has been made obligatory. The Imam replied: "Verily, Allah made fasting obligatory in order to

equalize between the poor and the rich. Surely, the rich people would not otherwise feel the pain of hunger to be kind to the poor. For the rich will reach anything they wish. Thus, the Almighty Allah willed to equalize between His servants and to give a taste of the pain of hunger to the rich so that he becomes more lenient to the weak people and be more merciful towards the hungry ones."[6]

Although fasting has some social benefits, this is not the main purpose of fasting. Thus, fasting is obligatory both on the poor and the rich. The main purpose of fasting is to gain 'self-restraint' as stated in the holy Qur'an: "O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, that you may observe self-restraint (al-Taqwa)." [2:183]

None is needless of self-restraint. Even the Prophet of Islam and the pure Imams (s.a) needed to maintain their high standards of piety by the virtue of fasting. Thus, fasting is mandatory for all Muslims.

Unique Characteristics of Fasting

Fasting, like praying and pilgrimage to Hajj, is worshipping. Nonetheless, it has its own unique characteristics. The following are some of the unique characteristics of fasting.

à The longest worshipping: Fasting is the longest worshipping of God. Daily Prayers will not take more than one hour every day at most. Pilgrimage to Hajj will not take more than a few weeks in a life time. The worshipping of fasting is about 12 to 16 hours (depending on the season and your geographical location) and lasts for a whole month every year. In other words, a faster typically spends more than 400 hours within one month for worshipping Allah! Isn't this amazing?!

à Does not interrupt your daily life: Fasting unlike other types of worshipping does not interrupt our daily transactions. One cannot normally offer his/her daily prayers whilst working. You ought to take a break from your work, perform your Wudhu, find a suitable place and offer your Salat. Pilgrimage to Hajj is even more so interrupting your daily life. Fasting exceptionally is the only type of worshipping that can be observed whilst one is doing his normal daily work. It does not interrupt your worldly life at all. Amazingly a faster is still in the state of worshipping Allah even if he/she is asleep. Fasting is only in conflict with sinning.

à Worshipping God without any action: All other types of worshipping consist of some actions. Take the example of daily Prayers. It is the combination of some recitation of the Qur'an, some Thikr in different postures. The same applies to Hajj, Zakat etc. Fasting is the only of worshipping of Allah that amazingly consists of some non-doings! Fasting is avoidance of drinking, eating etc. a faster does not require doing anything. It is enough no to do anything!

This is the reason why it is in no conflict with our daily lives.

à The most sincere worshipping: Worshipping God is like a perfume kept in its container. Once the lid is opened the fragrance flies and only its tasteless liquid remains. The best worshipping is the most secret of all. Once its seal is broken it may be spoiled by showing off. All other types of worshipping are prone to show off. Salat, which is meant to be offered in a group for its public nature is prone to showing off and hence can be easily void. Pilgrimage to hajj is even more prone to showing off. Fasting, however, is the only worshipping of Allah that none other than God would really know if you are fasting. Fasting is an inner worshipping and hence it can be the most sincere worshipping.

à The only worshipping act that there is a penalty (expiation) if missed deliberately. If any Muslim misses his daily Prayers even deliberately, although he has committed a mortal sin, he only has to make up the lapsed Prayers, there is no penalty involved in it. The same applies if one misses his pilgrimage to Hajj. Fasting is the only worshipping act that if is it deliberately missed in addition to making it up, there is a hefty penalty for it. Abdullah Ibn Sanan in an authentic Hadith narrated from Imam As-Sadiq (a.s) about the expiation against someone who has deliberately-and without any religious justification- broken one day of fasting saying: " He must free a salve or fast two months or feed sixty poor people, but if he was unable to do so, he must give charity as much as he can ." [7] This penalty becomes even heftier if the person has broken his fast with something Haraam such as drinking alcohol or masturbation.

The Rewards of Fasting

Fasting is one of the most sincere worshipping of God and hence its rewards are numerous. The following are some of the narrations about the abundant rewards of fasting.

à The reward of fasting is numerous: The Almighty Allah states: “And seek help in patience and the Prayers.” [2:45]

Patience in the above Ayah is interpreted to fasting, as fasting requires patience. A faster is therefore patient. The Almighty Allah with reference to the reward of the patient states: “Only those who are patient shall receive their reward in full without reckoning.” [39:10]

à Allah is the reward of fasting: It is narrated from the Prophet of Islam (S): “The Almighty Allah says: ‘For every good deed there are ten to seven hundred times rewards, save fasting. For fasting is for Me and I am the reward of it.’” [8]

Surely, what else would a faster wish for after having Allah as his reward and what would he have should he be deprived of the Presence of Allah. It is to this effect that the Messenger of Allah (S) reported to have said: “Only if you know what you may gain in the month of

Ramadhan you would have remembered God much thankfully."[9]

à Seven compulsory rewards of fasting: It is narrated from the Prophet of Islam (S): "No believer fasts the month of Ramadhan for the sake of Allah but the Almighty Allah will definitely grant him seven rewards: 1) It will melt the Haraam from his body, 2) It will bring him close to the Mercy of Allah, 3) It will rectify the mistake[10] of his father; Adam, 4) Allah will ease for him the stupor of death, 5) He will secure him from the thirst and the hunger of the Day of Judgment, 6)Allah will grant him liberation from Hell fire, and 7)Allah will feed him from the pure things of Paradise."[11]

à Worshipping Allah even when asleep: As mentioned earlier fasting is the only type of worshipping Allah that is in no conflict with our day to day transactions. It is narrated from the Prophet of Islam (S): "A faster is in worshipping God even if he is asleep in his bed as long as he does not back-bite any Muslim."[12]

à Special Entrance for the fasters: It is narrated from the Prophet of Islam (S): "There is a special entrance to Paradise called 'al-Rayyan' (satisfaction) none will enter through that gate save the fasters." [13]

à Angels pray for the faster: Angels are infallible and their prayers are granted, especially if they are commanded by Allah to pray. It is narrated from Imam Al-Baqir (a.s): "Surely, the Almighty Allah has appointed a group of angels for the fasters. They seek Allah's forgiveness for them in every day of Ramadhan to the end of it. They cry to the fasters every evening at the time the fasters break their fast: Glad tidings for you, O servants of Allah! Indeed you hungered for a little while but you will be satisfied for long. You are blessed and the blessing is in you. Until when it is the last night of the month of Ramadhan, they cry out: Glad tidings for you O servants of Allah. Indeed the Almighty Allah forgave your previous sins and accepted your repentance. Thus, watch how you will act in your new file."[14]

à Ten consecutive years of fasting grants Paradise: Muhammad Ibn al-Hasan al-Karkhi said: "I heard Imam Hasan (a.s) saying to a man in his house: "O Aba Haroun! Whoever fasts ten consecutive months of Ramadhan will enter Paradise ."[15]

The Punishment of Not Fasting

To be deprived of all the promised rewards of fasting is the most severe punishment. Fasting is an obligation in Islam denial of which equals blasphemy. "Whoever Muslim does not fast during the month of Ramadhan (without any valid reason), has lost his spirit of Faith," narrated from Imam As-Sadiq (a.s). [16]

If one breaks his fast deliberately he has to compensate it with sixty days of fasting or feeding

sixty poor people. If he breaks his fast with that which is Haraam in itself, such as drinking alcohol or masturbation and the like, then he has to compensate it for every day with sixty days of fasting in addition to the day he did not fast as well as feeding sixty poor people.

Sighting of the New Moon

Fasting is prescribed in the month of Ramadhan. The Islamic calendar is Lunar. Ramadhan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. The advantage of the lunar based calendar is that the observation of the months is easily possible for all people. One needs to be acquainted with astronomy or refer to a reliable calendar to find out about the solar based calendar. Otherwise, you will not have any idea when, for example, the first day of October is going to be.

The lunar calendar can easily be observed by all people by sighting the moon. The moon is the only natural satellite of earth. The moon is the second brightest object in Earth's sky, after the Sun. Thus, its observation requires not astronomical equipment. Even the crescent moon is nearly always visible by naked eyes.

The Moon has no light and it shines by reflecting the light of the Sun. The moon moves in an elliptical (oval-shaped) orbit around Earth at an average speed of 3,700 km/h. For the Moon to go from one phase to the next similar phase-as seen from Earth-it requires 29 days 12 hours and 44 minutes. This period is called a lunar month. On the observation of the new moon with a naked eye, the lunar month will be either 29 days or 30 days depending on the angle and the height at which the new moon is sighted.

The Moon shows progressively different phases as it moves along its orbit around the Earth. Half the Moon is always in sunlight, just as half of Earth has day while the other half has night. In the phase called the new moon, the near side is completely in shadow. About a week after a new moon, the Moon is in first quarter, resembling a luminous half-circle; another week later, the full moon shows its fully lit near side; a week afterwards, in its last quarter, the Moon appears as a half-circle again. The entire cycle is repeated each lunar month.

With a bit of experimental observation any individual will be able to identify the age of the moon and hence the day and the month he is in.

In order to facilitate the observation of the Islamic rituals for all Muslims, the Islamic calendar is lunar based. The Almighty Allah states in the Qur'an: "They ask you about the new moons. Say: these are signs to mark fixed periods of time for mankind and for the pilgrimage." [2:189]

It is narrated from the Prophet of Islam (S) that 'the fixed period of time' is for observing the fasting of Ramadhan and breaking of the fast at the end of the month as well as for observation of the Hajj ceremony.

Numerous Hadith state: “Start the fasting by sighting the crescent moon (of Ramadhan) and stop fasting by sighting the crescent moon (of Shawwal).”[17]

Authentic narrations also state that if the new moon was not visible due to the clouds or similar obstacles, one must complete the days of the month to 30 days. If a day is doubtful whether it is the last day of Sha’ban or the first day of Ramadhan, it is Haraam to fast with the intention of the first day of Ramadhan. It is however recommended to observe the fasting of that day but with the intention of the last day of Sha’ban as a Mustahab fasting.

One cannot make up his/her Qada (lapsed) fasting on that day either. Similarly, one must continue fasting of the doubtful day at the end of Ramadhan, until it is proven to be the day of Eid. If one however completed the fast and then found out that it was the day of Eid, there is no sin on him as his intention was not to fast on the day of Eid. In short, the general rule about doubtful days is to complete the day of the month to 30 days.

“You must complete the number (of days).” [2:185]

Ali Ibn al-Qasani narrated: “I wrote to Imam As-Sadiq (a.s) while I was in Madina if we had to fast on the day which is doubtful whether it is the first day of Ramadhan or the last day of Sha’ban. The Imam (a.s) replied back: ‘Doubt shall not enter certainty. Observe fasting when you see the new moon (of Ramadhan) and break your fast when you see the new moon (of Shawwal).’”[18]

Criteria for Sighting the Crescent Moon

The Moon is a celestial body. In order for us to observe a celestial body in the sky two main criteria are involved. 1) The object must be bright enough, 2) Because the earth is spherical; the altitude of the object at the horizon must be high enough to reach the angle of human eye sight.

Although the Moon is the second brightest body in the Earth’s sky, it has no light from itself. Thus, in order for the new crescent moon to be visible it has to be at a certain angle with the Sun to reflect the sunlight. This will be achieved if the moonset is at least 47 minutes after the sunset.

That means the age of the new moon at local sunset must be 24 hours plus or minus 2 hours. In astronomical terminology this means the difference in azimuth between Sun and Moon shall not be less than 25 degrees while the Moon’s altitude at sunset is not less than 12 degrees.[19]

Although there are other criteria also involved in sighting the crescent moon such as brightness of the evening sky, contrast requirements of the eye, atmospheric reflection, etc, the above two

mentioned criteria are the main.

We also have to bear in mind that the Moon usually[20] rises from the west whereas the sun rises from the east. Thus, the probability of visibility of the new moon decreases to the east. That means people at the western parts of the world will be the fist to sight the new moon whilst the Far East being the last. This will sometimes result in one day difference between the western sight and the eastern sight of the moon.

Methods of Ascribing the First Day of a Lunar Month

The Grand Ayatollah Seestani in his Islamic Laws explains the methods of ascribing the first day of a lunar month as follows: "1739. The first day of a month is established in the following four ways:

• If a person himself sights the moon.

• If a number of persons confirm to have sighted the moon and their words assure or satisfy a person. Similarly, every other thing which assures or satisfies him about the moon having being sighted.

• If two just (Adil) persons say that they have sighted the moon at night. The fist day of the month will not be established if they differ about the details of the new moon. This difference can be either explicit or even implied.

For example, when a group of people go out in search of the new moon and none but two Adils claim to have seen the new moon, though, among those who did not see, there were other Adils equally capable and knowledgeable, then the testimony by the two Adils will not prove the advent of a new month.

• If 30 days pass from the first of Sha'ban, the first of Ramadhan will be established, and if 30 days pass from the l first of Ramadhan the first of Shawwal will be established.

1740. The first day of any month will not be proved by the verdict of a Mujtahed and it is better to observe precaution.

1741. The first day of any month will not be proved by the prediction made by the astronomers. However, if a person derives full satisfaction and certitude from their finding, he should act accordingly.

1742. If the moon is high up in the sky, or sets late, it is not an indication that the previous night was the first night of the month. Similarly, if there is a halo round it, it is not a proof that the new moon appeared in the previous night.

1743. If the first day of the month of Ramadhan is not proved for a person and he does not observe fast, and if it is proved later that the preceding night was in fact the night of

Ramadhan, he should observe qada of that day.

1744. If the first day of a month is proved in a city, it is also proved in other cities if they are united in their horizon. And the meaning of having a common horizon in this matter is that if the new moon was sighted in a city, there would a distinct possibility of sighting it in the other cities, if there were no impediments, like, the clouds etc.

1745. The first day of a month is not proved by a telegram except when one is sure that the telegram is based on the testimony of two Adils, or on a source which is reliable in the eyes of Shariah.

1746. If a person does not know whether it is the last day of Ramadhan or the first day of Shawwal, he should observe fast on that day, and if he comes to know during the day that it is the first of Shawwal, he should break the fast." [21]

Du'a at the Time of Sighting the New Moon

Jaber narrated from Imam Al-Baqir (a.s): "When the Messenger of Allah (S) was sighting the crescent moon of Ramadhan he would stand towards the Qiblah whilst raising his hands saying: "O Allah! Welcome the new month for us with security and faith and safety and Islam and good health and abundant sustenance and keeping away of diseases. O Allah! Grant us to fast (during the days) in this month and stand for prayer (at night) and recite the Qur'an in it. O Allah! Protect Ramadhan for us and protect us for it and protect us in it." [22]

The Etiquettes of Fasting

à Avoid Haraam Deeds: Fasting begins with avoiding eating and drinking but does not stop on them. It is expected from a fasting person to control his tongue from all types of verbal sins such as gossiping, swearing, lying etc. Similarly, he is expected to avoid any Haram food. A fasting person is not expected to break his fast at a restaurant that its Halal food is not confirmed. He should also avoid the invitation of people whom he is not sure about their Halal meal.

A fasting person should also observe all his/her prayers on time. Girls and ladies are expected to observe the Islamic dress code of Hijab. Muslims who fast without refraining from sins may not fain more than mere thirst and hunger. I have elaborated more on this etiquette of fasting in 'The Intermediate Stage of Fasting'.

à Recitation of the Holy Qur'an: the month of Ramadhan is a month in which the Holy Qur'an was revealed. According to a Prophetic Narration "Everything has a best season and the best season of Qur'an is Ramadhan."

à Nightly Supplications (Du'a): The nights of Ramadhan are the best time for supplication and invocating Allah. There is a unique Ayah in the Qur'an with reference to the significance of Du'a which is revealed amidst the Ayaat of Ramadhan. The Almighty Allah in Surah al-Baqarah states: "And when My servants ask you concerning Me, then surely I am very near; I answer the prayer of the suppliant when he calls upon Me, so they should answer My call and believe in Me that hey may walk in the right way." [2:186]

The single pronoun 'Me' or 'My' or 'I' is repeated seven times in this Ayah.

à Paying Charity

à Napping: The month of Ramadhan changes our sleeping patterns. For those who are not used to being awake at dawn, their sleeping hours feel interrupted. Many fasters suffer from fatigue more than hunger or thirst. A short nap during the day regenerates the body and also helps the faster for night supplication. It is narrated from the Prophet of Islam (S): "The sleeping of a faster is worshipping and his breathing is glorification." [23]

à It is narrated from Imam Kadhim (a.s): "Take a nap, for surely, Allah will feed and satisfy the faster in his sleep." [24]

à Praying Maghreb before breaking the fast: Of the etiquettes of fasting is to offer the Maghreb Prayer and then break the fast. However, if the faster is too weak to pray or there are other people who wish to break their fast first and they wait for him, then he should break his fast first. Zorarah and Fodhayl narrated from Imam Al-Baqir (a.s): "It is better in the month of Ramadhan to pray then break your fast unless there are people waiting for you to break their fast. Then do not disagree with them. Break your fast with them and then pray, otherwise, offer your prayer first." Zorarah and Fodhayl asked why praying before breaking fast is more virtuous? The Imam (a.s) explained: "This is because the time for two obligations has arrived; breaking the fast and Salat and I would prefer to begin with the more virtuous of the two. Obviously, Salat is more virtuous. When you pray whilst you are still fasting, your Salat will be written as the Salat of a fasting person which is more desirable to me." [25]

à Inviting Muslims for Breakfast: Hospitality and generosity is a virtue in Islam. It is a sign of believeing in Allah and the Day of Judgment that one opens his house to visitors. The Almighty JAllah will forgive certain sins of a hospitable Muslim. Of the strongly recommended etiquettes of the month of Ramadhan is to invite a fasting person over for Iftar. It is narrated from Imam As-Sadiq (a.s): "Whoever provides breakfast for a fasting person will have the same reward (of fasting)."[26] It is even narrated from Imam Kadhem (a.s) that "The reward of feeding a fasting person is more than fasting itself."[27] Hospitality is more rewarding when one invites poor Muslims and their near of kin and more pious people. One can also sponsor a poor family and

send the money to them for their Ramadhan expenses. Imam As-Sadiq (a.s) narrated: “My grandfather; Zainul-Abedin (a.s) used to cook a sheep whilst he was fasting and in the evening would distribute it all to different families. He would then break his fast with bread and dates.”[28]

à Eating Sohoor: Some fasters skip the Sohoor (eating at dawn). They are either too lazy to get up at that time of the morning or not used to eating that early. These people usually have something late at night before they go to bed and don’t get up for Sohoor. Ironically they may even miss their Fajr prayers. Their typical excuse is that they need sleeping more than food. Although having Sohoor is not compulsory, it is strongly recommended in Ramadhan. Imam As-Sadiq (a.s) in response to the one who asked if Sohoor is compulsory said: “It is permissible not to have Sohoor if he so wishes, but in the month of Ramadhan it is more virtuous to have Sohoor. We like people not to miss it in the month of Ramadhan.” [29]

Sawm of Wesal’ is forbidden in Islam. That is to fast from one evening to another. In another narration the Messenger of Allah (S) said: “Have Sohoor even if it is a glass of water. Be aware! The Blessings of Allah is upon those who have Sohoor.”[30]

The purpose of Sohoor is not just to feed the body. Waking up for Sohoor is a good exercise of being awake at the holy time of dawn. Throughout one month the Almighty Allah trains us to wake up at least half an hour before the Fajr prayer to merely eat! To enforce the training, Allah forbids us to eat and drink from Fajr to the evening. Then lest we feel hungry or thirsty we Endeavour to wake up at that early time. After one month of consecutive Sohoor, a faster is used to waking up early. Thus, the main purpose of Sohoor is to learn to virtuous practice of early rising.

à Breaking the Fast With Milk and Dates: It is narrated from Imam As-Sadiq (a.s): “The first thing that the Messenger of Allah (S) was breaking his fast with was a ripe date, if it was its season, or dried date in other seasons.”[31] It is also narrated that Imam Ali (a.s) would prefer to break the fast with milk. Other narrations suggest that in the absence of milk or dates, Ahlul-Bait (a.s) would break their fast with water. For it will cleanse the stomach and liver and relieve .headaches

Notes

Al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar, vol.58. p.341 [2]

[3] Kulayni, al-Kafi, vol.4 p.69

[4] The Holy Qur’an 44:4

[5] Al-Hurr al-Ameli, Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol.10 p.242

[6] As-Saduq, al-Faqih vol.2 p.43.

[7] Al-Hurr al-A'meli, Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol. 10, p.45, Hadith 12789

[8] Muhsen al-Kashani, al-Mahajjatul-Baydha, vol.2 p121 The above translation is based on the passing reading of the verb 'Ojza" in the Arabic text. If the verb is read in an active format it should be translated: "Fasting is for Me and I will reward it."

[9] Al-Hurr al-A'meli, Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol.10 p.243

[10] 'mistake' here is meant for what Adam would be better not to do. I have dealt with this issue in "Original Sin; Myth or Truth"

[11] Al-Hurr al-A'meli, Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol.10 p.241

[12] Al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar, vol.75 p.249

[13] Al-Hurr al-A'meli, Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol.10 p.241

[14] Al-Hurr al-A'meli, Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol.10 p.243

[15] As-Saduq, al-Khisal p.445, The Hadith includes also those who miss their fasting with a valid excuse-such as illness- and make it up during the year.

[16] Al-Hurr al-A'meli, Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol. 10, p.246, Hadith 13325

[17] Al-Khulayni, Al-Kafi, vol.4 p.76

[18] Al-Hurr al-A'meli, Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol.10 pp.255-256

[19] The above criteria is for the best sighting, otherwise subject to other atmospheric conditions, it is still possible to sight the moon when the altitude is nine degree or above.

[20] The rise of the moon rarely starts from the southern part of the earth coming up to the north.

[21] Note that this month the moon will be rising from the southern hemisphere to the north and hence its altitude on Saturday in the Middle East is lower than Oceana.

[22] Al-Khulayni, al-Kafi vol.4 p.70

[23] Al-Hurr al-A'meli, Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol.10 p.137

[30] Al-Hurr al-A'meli, Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol.10 p.144

[31] Al-Khulayni, al-Kafi, vol.4 p.153.

.[32] Al-Khulayni, al-Kafi, vol.4 p.152