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Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr



A major celebration in Islam occurs after the completion of **Ramadan**, the month during which Muslims (believers in Islam) fast daily from dawn to sunset as part of an effort towards self-purification and betterment. This holiday is known as *Eid al-Fitr* (Festival of Breaking the Fast).

The Lunar Calendar

Among the most important duties for a Muslim is fasting during the Islamic month of Ramadan, which is the ninth of the twelve months in the Islamic lunar calendar. Muslims use a lunar calendar for many of their religious observances. A new month in the lunar calendar is determined by the appearance of a new crescent moon. Since this occurs every 29 or 30 days, the lunar month is generally 1 or 2 days shorter than a typical month in the Gregorian calendar (the calendar used in the United States). Similarly, a lunar year is about 11 days shorter than a typical Gregorian year. As a result, dates of events in the Islamic lunar year “move forward” about 11 days every year. For example, in 1997 Ramadan begins on December 31, and in 1998 it begins on December 20.

The Importance of Ramadan

Ramadan is important for Muslims because it is believed to be the month in which the first verses of the Holy **Qur’an** (the divine scripture) were revealed by **Allah** (God) to the Prophet **Muhammad** (570-632 C.E.). From time to time, Muhammad used to go out from Makkah, where he was born and where he worked as a caravan trader, to reflect and meditate in solitude. Like Abraham before him, he had never accepted his people’s worship of many gods, and felt a need to withdraw to a quiet place to reflect on the One God. One night, while contemplating in a cave near Makkah, he heard a voice call out, telling him to “Read!” Muhammad protested that he was unable to read. The voice insisted again, and then a third time, and Muhammad found himself reciting the first verses of the Qur’an:

*“Read, in the name of thy Lord, Who created—
Created man, out of a clot (embryo).
Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful,
He Who taught the use of the pen—
Taught man that which he knew not.
Nay, but man doth transgress all bounds,
In that he looketh upon himself as self-sufficient.
Verily, to thy Lord is the return (of all).”* (ch. 96: 1-8)

The voice was that of the angel **Gabriel**, and he confirmed that Muhammad was selected for an important and challenging mission—he was to call people to monotheism and righteousness.

Muslims consider the Qur'an to be God's speech recorded in the Arabic language, and transmitted to humanity through Muhammad, who is considered the last of the prophets. According to Islamic beliefs, this tradition of God-chosen prophets or messengers includes such figures as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. Muslims believe that over a period of twenty-three years, various verses and chapters of the Qur'an were revealed to Muhammad through Gabriel. The Qur'an is comprised of 114 chapters of varying length, with titles such as "*Abraham*," "*The Pilgrimage*," "*Mary*," and "*Repentance*."

During Ramadan, Muslims fast from dawn to sunset every day. This means not consuming food or drink (including water) during the daylight hours. For married adults, it also includes refraining from marital relations during the hours of fasting (i.e. the daylight hours). In the Arabic language, fasting is known as *sawm*. Muslims arise early in the morning during Ramadan to have a predawn breakfast meal, known as *suhoor*. At the end of the day, the fast is completed by taking the *iftar* meal, which usually includes dates, fresh fruits, appetizers, beverages and dinner. Later in the evening, Muslims often attend special nightly *tarawih* prayers at their local *masjid*. Each night during Ramadan, approximately 1/30th of the Qur'an is recited in the tarawih prayers, so that the entire scripture is recited in the course of the 29 or 30 days of the month.

Why Muslims Fast

For Muslims, fasting has a number of benefits:

1. It helps one to feel compassion for those who are less fortunate and underprivileged, since each day Muslims feel greater appreciation for what they have as a result of feeling hunger and thirst.
2. It allows one to build a sense of self-control and willpower, which can be beneficial throughout life in dealing with temptations and peer-pressure. Through fasting, Muslims learn to control their natural urges such as hunger and thirst, and thus are able to better resist temptations for things which are not necessary, such as drugs or other unhealthy or harmful substances and behaviors.
3. It offers a time for Muslims to "purify" their bodies as well as their souls, by developing a greater sense of humility, spirituality and community. Ramadan is a very spiritual time for Muslims, and often they invite each other to one another's homes to break the fast and pray together. A greater sense of generosity and forgiveness is also characteristic of this time.

As with other duties in Islam, fasting becomes obligatory (i.e. one becomes accountable) after the age of puberty.

The “Night of Power”

Laylat al-Qadr, [lay-lat-al-KADR] or the “Night of Power,” is one of the last ten nights of the month of *Ramadan*. It is significant as the night on which in 610 C.E. the Prophet Muhammad received the first revelations of the *Qur’an*. Muslims commemorate this night, believed to fall on the 23rd, 25th, or 27th of *Ramadan*, by offering additional prayers and supplications late into the night. It is said that the blessings for praying on this night are greater than those received for praying for a thousand months.

Eid al-Fitr

After the end of Ramadan, a very festive and joyous holiday is celebrated by Muslims, known as *Eid al-Fitr* [EED al-FITR], the Festival of Breaking the Fast. On the day of the Eid, Muslims attend special congregational prayers in the morning, wearing their nicest clothes and perfumes. After the completion of prayers and a special sermon, Muslims rise to greet and hug one another, saying “*Eid Mubarak*,” which means “Holiday Blessings.” Later on, Muslim families visit each other’s homes, and have special meals together. Children are often rewarded with gifts, money, and sweets. Lights and other decorations mark the happy occasion. ❁



Ramadan Again!



SUHOOR: Buzzzz! The alarm sounds, only this time, two hours earlier than usual. My mom calls out “Hasan, it’s time to get up!” Yes, 4 a.m. in the morning I wake up with my family to have breakfast and begin the fast. My favorites are pancakes, orange juice, Grape Nuts cereal, hash browns, and eggs. I get to mix and match throughout the week. My heart is beating fast and I am excited about this unique opportunity. After eating, I offer the morning prayer with my family and then read from the Qur’an for a while before going back to bed to catch a few more zzz’s.

SCHOOL: The only times during the day when I feel the fast are at lunch time and in P.E. In the cafeteria, I sit with my friends and they tease me in the beginning, but later understand and respect my dedication. Now, P.E. is another story. Some of my Muslim friends get excused from physical activity, but me, I love it, even when I’m fasting. My friends say I play harder and longer when I’m fasting. Sometimes I feel as if I have this great strength inside of me that keeps me going. The bell rings at 3 p.m. Yep, I made it through school and now it’s just three hours before sunset.

HOME: The first thing I do when I get home is to offer the afternoon prayers and read from the Qur’an. I used to do this because my parents told me I should, now I know how important it is and do it on my own. I feel replenished and content, and finish up my homework. Math, science, history, and art—complete! All in a day’s work. I relax and take a nap prior to breaking the fast.

IFTAR: Iftar time in any Muslim home is a festive, joyous time. Special foods are prepared and the whole family comes together for the meal. It is a time to reflect on the many blessings God has provided and also realize how the poor and less fortunate ones feel on a daily basis. After dinner and the dusk prayer, we prepare to go to the masjid. I love going to the masjid, I see all my friends and relatives there, but more importantly it is so quiet and peaceful. At the masjid we offer our evening and tarawih prayers and come back home by 9:30 p.m. By the time I get home I am tired and exhausted. However, I realize that the training to become a better person, and a better Muslim, continues. I can’t wait until the morning, so I set my alarm and fall asleep quickly! ❁

Discussion Questions

1. What is the month of Ramadan?
2. Why is this month important for Muslims?
3. What does fasting mean?
4. At what age does fasting become a requirement for Muslims?
5. Explain the terms SAWM, SUHOOR, IFTAR.
6. What are the benefits of fasting?
7. How does fasting enable one to feel compassion for those who are less fortunate and underprivileged?
8. How can fasting help to deal with peer pressure?
9. What marks the end of Ramadan?
10. If you were to fast for one day, what would you miss the most? Why? Is it possible to change one's habits by fasting?
11. How would you have to change your schedule to accommodate fasting? What dietary changes do you think you would have to make? Include the predawn meal of Suhoor in your schedule.
12. How do Muslims finish off the month of Ramadan?
13. After reading, "A Day in the Life of Hasan," what do you think of Hasan's life-style, especially during Ramadan?

Suggested Student Activities

1. Interview a Muslim who is fasting. Ask him or her how they feel about fasting and how it helps them in their lives.
2. Invite a representative from the local Islamic Center or *masjid* (mosque) to speak about the spirit of Ramadan, and have students prepare questions for the visitor. (Teachers may also arrange for students to be part of an *Iftar* gathering at the Islamic Center or a parent's home.)
3. Plan an Eid party. Explain how you would feel after successfully fasting for one month. What physical changes might one experience? Emotional changes?
4. One of the key lessons to be learned during the month of Ramadan is compassion for those who are underprivileged and have a more difficult time in getting food for themselves. Pretend you have been fasting for one month. Describe your reactions to one of the following and why you would react in this way:
 - a. A woman and child asking for food and money on a street corner.
 - b. Homeless people in your own city.
 - c. Television portrayals of hungry children in faraway lands.
 - d. An expensive, luxury restaurant that disposes of all unused foods.