

Pilgrimage

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The Muslim pilgrimage, known as *Hajj*, is an obligatory ritual that all able bodied, financially capable Muslims must perform at least once during their life time. Both males and females who reach the age of sexual maturity and possess the means, and whose personal circumstances permit them to do so, are required to make the journey to the city of Mecca. This journey must take place during a specific lunar month known as *Dhul Hijja*, which means “The Month of Pilgrimage”. If the lack of safety or other conditions prevent one from fulfilling this obligation during the present time, then one must do so as soon as these conditions change.

Hajj is a journey that is sure to have a profound spiritual impact on all who experience it. The stories of Allah’s messengers show how each one of them travelled to better know himself and his maker. Moses’ trips to the mountain, into Egypt, and back into the outskirts of the holy land, Jesus’ wondering in contemplation and being tempted by the devil; and Muhammad’s frequent meditations in the cave and his immigration to Medina, were all pilgrimages on this path. But there was one journey that the Patriarch of all divine faiths performed that speaks the complete journey of humankind from birth to death. That was Abraham’s journey into and around Mecca. The Muslim hajj is a step by step reenactment of that trip.

As a Muslim pilgrim, when I set out on my journey to Medina, the city of Prophet Muhammad, in route to Mecca, mysteries began to unfold. As I stood in front of the Prophet’s shrine I found myself uttering words that begged for his intercession. Am I worthy of standing before you? Have I heeded the words that you promised will bring peace and love to all of humanity? Did I truly understand the words of the Quran that called you a “mercy for mankind”ⁱ? Yet, I had the courage and audacity to beseech him to prepare me for the ultimate journey that follows the footsteps of Abraham, a journey that takes us through the stages of birth, life, death, and resurrection. For I know that if he intercedes for me Allah will permit me to continue my journey.

When I reached the place called “the gate to Mecca”, the Mosque of the Tree, I shed all of my clothes and replaced them with two white unsown towels that every man must wear. Women must wear modest clothing. All pilgrims must abandon every embellishment including jewelry, fancy watches, cologne, perfume, and all that distinguishes us from others. But first, we had to perform a ritual ablution, a baptism of sorts so that we can become born again Muslims upon completing the journey. Then we wrap ourselves with the two white pieces of cloth which are also used to wrap a Muslim upon his or her death. I was overtaken by tears when another epiphany shined upon my soul. These rituals of bathing and wrapping in sheets are the same that must be performed when one dies.

The picture is vivid now. This is my trip back to my Lord. How fitting it is that God wants us to follow the footsteps of Abraham who is the father of pure monotheismⁱⁱ. No longer do I have my wealth or social status with me. I am not a distinguished westerner, nor is my fellow pilgrim a high level executive at a global company. My bank accounts, my house, and all of my belongings are not mine now. I am only a

creature of the God of Abraham and at His mercy and grace. I, and all of my fellow pilgrims, are like the dead who were washed, clothed in the same manner, and sent out to meet their maker.

As we approached the city of Abraham, Mecca, more mysteries unfolded. I entered the Grand Mosque to the most magnificent and simple site, the Kaa'ba. The simple house built by Abraham and his son Ishmael for the sole purpose that I, after thousands of years, shall come stripped of all of my worldly embellishments, wearing only the two death shrouds, to go around it. This is a proclamation that I will put the house of God that Abraham erected to my left, where my heart lies, and go around it shoulder to shoulder with brothers and sisters of every race, every land, every sect, and every language. We are now all equal. We all seek to follow the pure monotheism of Abraham who loved God and put Him alone in his heart. We all must do that at the same time and follow it by praying behind the *Stand of Abraham* where he stood to build the Kaaba to show that we pray behind the father of Monotheism. He is our Imam, he is our example, and he gave us the name Muslims, the submitters in peace to the will of the one and only deity, Allah.

We then drink from the well of Ishmael that miraculously flowed with water since Ishmael kicked the ground with his foot in desperation as a baby. He was thirsty for water in this desolate desert as his mother, our mother, Hager ran from one mountain to another. I did the same. She never gave up hope that the God of Abraham will come through for her and her son, nor will I. My thirst might not be for water but for peace, harmony, understanding, and happiness for all the children of the world and not just my mother Hager's child. Yes, seven times she did so and seven times I shall do the same. I then cut some of my hair to shed more of what material attachments I have. Every step of the Hajj brought me closer to Abraham, to his God, and to the day when I shall be brought back to be judged. How did I do with God's trust, and my humanity in which He entrusted me with, and its dominion over everything, and myself.

We prayed, we supplicated, we recited the Quran, we conferred with our brothers and sisters from the around the world. We prepared ourselves for the *Grand Hajj*.

We then shrouded ourselves with the same simple white pieces and departed Mecca to the plain of Arafat which was given this name when Adam and Eve reunited after departing the garden for eating from the forbidden tree. Arafat means recognizing one another. It resembles the day when Allah shall gather every man and woman on a plain to await His judgment. We stayed in tents side by side with other people who we have never met before yet they are our brothers and sisters now. Just as we will lie side by side after death with others we don't know but they will be our close neighbors until we are resurrected back to life for judgment. That day of Arafat, which is also known as the *Grand Hajj*, after sunset, every pilgrim heads through a journey to the final days of hajj, the days that resemble our passing over the path that traverses the Hell fire on the journey to Paradise. Overnight, we stop in the plane of *Muzdalefa*, a place in which we beseech our maker under the naked sky to accept our good deeds and forgive our shortcomings. Then following sunrise, the sea of people rushed to Mena, which means *wish*, as it reminds us of Paradise, our ultimate wish. But before reaching our tents, we go to stone the site upon which Satan tempted Ishmael, Hager, and Abraham as the patriarch was preparing

to fulfill Allah's command to slaughter his son Ishmael. With this symbolic stoning with small pebbles, we fight our demons and self indulgences, our prejudices, tyrannies, hypocrisies, and all other ills.

The same day, every one must sacrifice an animal to save Ishmael just as Allah sent a lamb to save him. This timeless sacrifice, known as the Great Sacrifice, feeds the poor around the world for months after the hajj. Millions of poor around the world are sustained by this meat, which they could only dream of otherwise.

This is followed by the shaving of one's head for all men who make the trip for the first time, an act symbolizing the shedding of all material attachments. We then travel back to Mecca to perform our last journey around the Kaa'ba to bid farewell. We pray again behind the Stand of Abraham and return home clean of all sins, united with all of our brothers and sisters from around the world, ready to be upright followers of Abraham for we are now, born again Muslims.

ⁱ Quran 2:107

ⁱⁱ Quran 2:135