

The Spirit Of Sacrifice

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Eid al-Azha, an annual festival of Muslims, is celebrated in the last month of the Hijra calendar, that is, Zul Hijja. Muslims from all over the world gather at Mecca to celebrate Haj in the month of Zul Hijja.

To celebrate Eid al-Azha is like partial performance of Haj; it's a day of solidarity.

Only a select number of Muslims would be able to perform Haj by visiting Mecca; the rest perform Eid al-Azha wherever they live, spread out across the world. The entire Muslim world is involved in celebrating the special day.

Eid al-Azha literally means Eid of sacrifice. Muslims sacrifice an animal on this day, a symbolic sacrifice, that reminds us of the real sacrifice required throughout life. Haj and its practices are a symbolic re-enactment of acts performed by the family of Abraham – that is, the father Abraham, the son Ishmael and the mother, Hajira.

The story of Eid al-Azha is that Prophet Abraham had a dream in which he was sacrificing his young son, Ishmael. Abraham took his dream literally and wanted to sacrifice his son, who was about 10 years old at the time. But, according to tradition, God sent his angels and asked him to sacrifice an animal instead of his son. The real sacrifice, according to God's planning, was that Abraham had to settle his son along with his mother, near Mecca, which at that time was nothing but a vast desert. This kind of settlement would require great sacrifice on the part of this family. However, the settlement of this small family in the desert was the beginning of a new phase. After some years had elapsed, a caravan passed by and Ishmael married a girl from that caravan. This was the beginning of a new generation called the Ishmaelites.

There is a saying that "There is a woman at the beginning of all great things." In this case, the saying proved to be true, for a woman and her son had started not only a new generation but a new era. This generation was trained in the midst of nature, faced with different kinds of hardships. Within one thousand years a community had been created whose members were so strong in character that it was called a nation of heroes. All practices that are performed during Haj or during Eid al-Azha, are a symbolic repetition of all that was established by Abraham, his wife Hajira and son Ishmael.

Basically, two practices are performed by Muslims on the day of Eid al-Azha: congregational prayer in the mosque and the sacrificing of an animal. These two practices reflect the basic spirit of the occasion, a combination of two important states of mind – spirituality and dedication. Prayer is an expression of spirituality and sacrifice is an expression of dedication.

All the festivals are related to a story that may serve as a point of reference for healthy human activities. Eid al-Azha is a symbolic reminder of what occurred 4,000 years ago: it demonstrates that the sacrifice of a small group of people can create a new beginning for all of humankind.

Eid al-Azha is not to be viewed as a one-day celebration; its impact is required to last the entire year. It is like a symbolic rehearsal of high values and it is required that these values be translated into practical life all the year round.

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