

REPLENISHING THE FAITHFUL FASTING, CONCENTRATION DURING RAMADAN BRING MUSLIMS CLOSER TO GOD

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DURING Ramadan, Muslims will fast, strengthening both their bodies and their spirits.

Muslims believe that during the first night of Ramadan, God began to reveal the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad. The Quran is the Muslim holy book. Many figures that appear in the pages of the Old Testament, such as Moses and Abraham, are in the Quran, as are Jesus Christ and his mother Mary.

During the 30 days of Ramadan, which begins this year on Wednesday, Muslims will fast completely during daylight hours. They break the fast for a light meal before dawn and for an evening meal after sunset.

Besides giving up all food, liquid, tobacco or sex during the month of fasting, they must also abstain from "lying, cheating, back-biting, gossip, false witness and other bad habits," said Mohammad Jamal Daoudi, imam of the Islamic Association of West Virginia.

During the month of fasting, people put food and other distractions aside to concentrate on building a closer relationship with God, he said.

"Some people say when you start the fast you hate it, but by the end of the month, you hate to end it," Daoudi said. He said Muhammad explained that if people fully understood all the blessings that can come to them during Ramadan, they would wish that Ramadan lasted all year.

Each celebration of Ramadan should make people draw so much closer to God that it becomes more natural to put aside the bad habits people are consciously trying to refrain from during Ramadan.

"You should be a better person this year than you were last year from Ramadan. You should go up and up in your behavior," he said.

People think the night is for lovers, he said. But before dawn during Ramadan, Muslims are encouraged to meet with God for special prayers. "Wake up early and perform prayers. You can enjoy the quiet and give that special time to God. It will give you a special sweetness." They also eat a light meal then.

Daoudi said there are physical benefits from fasting. The body can cleanse itself of toxins during the fast, and people can lose weight. The practice of fasting can also be found in both the Jewish and Christian faiths. Before Christ began his ministry, he fasted for 40 days and nights.

But the spiritual benefits are even more long-lasting, he said.

Also during the month of Ramadan, Muslims are encouraged to perform acts of charity.

Unlike the Christian belief that grace will open the gates of heaven, Muslims believe they must earn their way on the Day of Judgment with good deeds. They believe that the good deeds they perform during Ramadan are multiplied.

"God will honor your prayers and supplications in a very blessed way during Ramadan," he said.

Besides the physical discipline and spiritual growth Ramadan fosters, Muslims believe it also helps them to understand the poor in a more tangible way. "How about those people who cannot find food at the end of the fast?" Daoudi asked. Feeling hunger helps Muslims to identify with the poor better than a sermon or a lecture can, he said.

Each Muslim must be responsible for feeding one poor person during Ramadan. Historically, Muslims have been able to send money through established worldwide charities to take care of poor families in countries like Palestine and Somalia. After the Sept. 11 attacks by Muslim extremists, federal authorities froze the assets of several of those charities, saying the charities were using the money to finance terrorism.

Daoudi said he is not sure yet how the money will be distributed this year.

Also this year, the shadow of war with Iraq hovers over Ramadan. But Daoudi said he can think of a crisis in a Muslim country every year for the last seven years. "We can be in deeper prayer to help us establish peace on earth. This is not done with guns or fighters. As Muslims, we are against war. My hope in God is stronger."

For Daoudi and his family, this will be their first Ramadan with him as the spiritual leader of the state group. He has some special programs planned. They will also invite the public to take part in weekend dinners at the center as part of the festivities.

The Islamic Society of North America is also calling on all people, regardless of denomination, to engage in prayer and fasting during Ramadan. Rabbi Arthur Waskow, writing for the group, called on people "to feed our bellies less and our hearts more."

With war looming, Waskow also wrote, "We urge that our government officials fast as well, to bethink themselves what abandonment of our own needs and hopes, what damage to our own freedom, what shattering of our own and others' lives and limbs, may erupt out of this war. For us all, we urge that this time of fasting become a time to pray and meditate."

For information about the Islamic Society of North America, visit the group's Web site at www.isna.net.

For information about the Islamic Association of West Virginia, call 744-4431.

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