

The Last Ten Days of Ramadan

by David (Daud) Sander, Ph.D.

Bismillah er Rahman er Rahim, [In the Name of Allah, The One Who Acts with Mercy, The Source of Mercy]. All praise belongs to Allah. Allah owns everything. All power belongs to Allah and not to us. May Allah's peace and blessings be on the Prophet Muhammad and his family and on all the other prophets and their families.

Dates to contemplate:

Laylatul Qadr [The Night of Power, Measuring Out, Destiny—among the last ten nights of Ramadan, according to the *hadith*, and of these, most likely to be an odd numbered night]

‘Urs of Hz. Pir Imam Ali waliyullah (Ramadan 21, the date of his passing)

‘Eid ul-Fitr [first day of the next month, Shawwal]

Truly We have sent it down on Laylatul Qadr.

And what will let you comprehend what Laylatul Qadr is? Laylatul Qadr is better than a thousand months.

In it, the angels and the Ruh [spirit] descend, by the permission of their Lord, on all kinds of affairs [min kulli amr.

Peace, it is, until the coming of the dawn.

Qur'an, Sura 97 (*Al Qadr*)

In these lines, I would like to continue contemplating time, how time can be experienced as a manifestation of Allah. In relation to Ramadan, we are being asked to consider different chunks of time: one month, a thousand months (which works out to one human lifetime, roughly 80 years), ten nights, one night. To me, these are interchangeable, so for example the month somehow resembles a whole life. How is the month like a lifetime? One night of this concentrated divine time outweighs a lifetime. Why?

I think it's significant that a shift comes after two thirds of the month is over. Having fasted for twenty days, your perceptions have been affected. You realize all the things you want to do of your own accord, from the obvious, like eating, to the more inward, like thinking, are tied to the food chain you are an insignificant part of.

I wonder if this is analogous to entering the last third of our lifespan. (Having recently turned 50, I have been reflecting on these things of late. Please allow my thoughts to come with that context.) The dryness of fasting can feel like looking back over years of incompleteness. It seems that the personal, partial mind is running on fumes. The thoughts, flourishes of logic and rhetoric through which we have habitually seen and explained ourselves, are not there anymore. It's kind of like being sleepless in the far reaches of the night, wondering who you are; you're looking at a puzzle with countless pieces, trying to see the "all", the unity in them. The partial views and contradictions of life are a bewildering desert. What events caused other events to happen? What was the right decision, who is at fault, who is good, who is bad? We want to see how our partial realities relate to the whole, the all, to infinity, to Allah.

On *laylatul qadr*, our desiccated, impoverished lives are offered a direct dose of unity. On this night, the angels and the *Ruh* descend on all kinds of affairs [*min kulli amr*]. The *kulli* [all] is connected to unity, like water in a million deserts made of dry particles, parts.

Ordinary, linear time is the desert we experience with our partial intellect, while *laylatul qadr* is

a door to universal time/eternity, in which “all affairs” are manifestations of the divine qualities and essence, the angels and the *ruh*. This could be the experience of peace (Peace it is), the unity of the partial and the total, until the dawn. Then what is the dawn?

This time in the calendar also coincides with the death of ‘Ali *waliyullah*, (the 21st of Ramadan). What does it mean? It has been said that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) worked to bring us the message, the *tanzil* [descent, revelation] of the Qur’an, and establish it in the community’s practice, and Imam ‘Ali worked to defend and preserve the *ta’wil* [deep interpretation and inner meanings] of this message. ‘Ali was a controversial figure in the early Muslim community. Some accepted his special status and along with it, the principle of spiritual guidance, connection, lineage and *ta’wil*. Others didn’t think any human could know the *ta’wil*, and that spiritual guidance wouldn’t continue to exist after the Prophet (peace be upon him). Some of these people challenged and even attacked ‘Ali over many years because the principle he stood for got in the way of their plans and designs.

A *hadith* says: “ ‘Alī is with the Qur’ān and the Qur’ān is with ‘Alī. They will not separate from each other until they return to me at the [paradisa]l pool [*al-hawq*].”ⁱ As I understand it, this implies the Qur’an by itself without ‘Ali, without the spirit of guided ‘*aql* [reasoning power; intellect] interpretation preserved in the *silsila* [line of spiritual ancestry], is not the full picture.

‘Ali’s death did not put an end to this spirit of the whole intellect or ‘*aql* (‘*aql kulli*). I’m sorry to bring this analogy but I’m reminded of Obi Wan Kenobi’s warning to Darth Vader (in the first Star Wars movie) that “if you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can imagine”. And thereafter, his student Luke hears his voice directly in his heart. Likewise, with the relationship of *walihood* [being a protecting friend; sainthood], ‘Ali becomes present in the heart, and his *ta’wil* can appear there, the *ta’wil* that is the unity between freedom and guidance. That spirit, both uncompromising and surrendering itself, enters the heart. It is nocturnal, invisible, not written in history books. The true spirit of Islam, outwardly struck down, enters hearts unseen.

After this holy nocturnal time, the last ten days of the month, ‘Ali’s ‘*urs* [death date] and *laylatul qadr*, we are left with the question (raised earlier about the last verse in Surah al Qadr) what is the “dawn” that follows? “Peace, it is, until the coming of the dawn.” Does it mean that this special peace will only continue until the dawn, then it’s back to business as usual? Or does the dawn imply a new dimension, a “sea-change”?

To my heart, this contemplation point brings a connection to ‘*Eid al Fitr*. The word *fitr* is related both to *iftar* and to *fitrah* and the divine name *Al-Fatir* [The Originator]. (The verb *fatara* implies “to split, cleave, break apart; to break the fast...[and also] to make, create, bring into being, bring forth”ⁱⁱ). How do these meanings connect with each other?

As a starting point for further contemplation, it seems to me that this whole show (fasting, breaking fast, Ramadan, ‘Ali’s story, *laylatul qadr*, and from a different angle, life itself) brings a breaking of old forms as a prelude to new creation. The exercise of fasting and commemoration that we do in time is a model or similitude for a birth of the true, inherent, original human nature (*fitrah*, or the spiritual child). This nature originates in the realm of infinity, “the all”, beyond time. And the divine quality or name mediating between time and eternity, between our incomplete selves and Allah’s realm is *Salaam*. Peace, it is, until the coming of the Dawn.

ⁱ Cited in Shah-Kazemi, Reza. *Justice and Remembrance : Introducing the Spirituality of Imam Ali*. London, GBR: I.B. Tauris, 2006, p. 12.

ⁱⁱ J.M. Cowan (ed.), *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. (Ithaca, NY: Spoken Language Services, Inc., 1976).

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