

Eid and the Imagery of Return

Eid al-Fitr, which falls on the 1st of the month of Shawwal, is a marker for the end of the fasting in the month of Ramadan. The other Eid, Eid al-Adha, which falls on the 10th of the month of Dhul-Hijjah, marks the completion of the Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca and its precincts. Those are the two days of the Islamic calendar on which fasting is strictly forbidden.

According to an authenticated report, or hadith, the Prophet Muhammad informed his fellow Muslims that whosoever stays awake and performs pious observances (*'ibadat*) on the eve of the two Eids, with hope for abundant reward (or *thawab*) from the Almighty, their hearts will not die on the Day when all hearts will die, that is, the Day of Judgment. What the Prophet Muhammad's words tell Muslims is that the end of obligatory fasting must not make them forget the value of the preceding month of Ramadan, and that they must not be waylaid by worldly matters. This accounts in part for the strongly recommended but optional six days of additional fasting prescribed to begin the day after Eid al-Fitr.

But how, then, are we to understand the role of festivities, on Eid al-Fitr? Eid al-Fitr is, after all, a time of celebration, marked in most cultures by the wearing of new clothes, or one's best clothes, by feasting, and by the exchange of gifts: The word Eid means as much. It is on this aspect of Eid, something we might even think of as a paradox, that of Eid as festival day, as its literal and ritual meanings make clear, and Eid as an occasion for intensified worship and devotion and repentance, as the words of the Prophet Muhammad make clear, that I propose to share a few thoughts.

Arabic is a language based principally on root letters. The word Eid is derived by lexicographers from the root letters, the basic meaning of which is 'return', though some etymologists have also plausibly suggested that Eid is a loan-word from Aramaic. I prefer the former explanation because of the resonances I detect in the word Eid of the notion of 'return'. Indeed, it has been explained as meaning specifically 'the periodically returning'.

One aspect of return that has been observed in Eid, especially by those scholars who have made Muslim feast-days a subject of academic study, is the preservation in the two Eid services of older forms of ritual prayer, such as the repeated ritual enunciation of God's greatness, or *takbir*, which is uttered only on Eid al-Fitr (and in some cultures on Eid al-Adha); the absence of the call to prayer (or *adhan*); and the recommendation of a congregation in the open air. Performance of Eid prayers is, then, in a sense a return, a return to older forms of ritual, a return to origins.

Eid's most obvious manifestation of return, other than periodic, yearly recurrence, is the appearance and re-birth of the moon, marking the end of one month and the beginning of the next. The moon, having followed its course, returns to its beginning and renews its covenant: "Running its appointed course", as *Surat al-Ra'd*, *aya* 2, or the Qur'an's 13th chapter, verse 2, describes it. And: "The sun and moon both follow exact courses", as *Surat al-Ra'man*, verse 5, the 55th chapter of the Qur'an, styles it.

Like the new moon, the observant Muslim, having complied with the prescribed rules of Ramadan, reaches the month of Shawwal, absolved. This absolution has been mentioned by the Prophet Muhammad who said on numerous occasions that the one who has passed Ramadan in the way of God, will have all sins forgiven (*ghufira lahu al-dhunūb*). The covenant is thereby renewed. In a cosmic and tidy intersection of language and function, women who, for natural

reasons, are unable to fast, precisely because of their own monthly course, are given a reprieve, and return to observance when they are able.

The metaphor of return is an integral one in Islam. In the language of religion, in the examples of the lives of the Prophets, in the observances of ritual, even in the organization of the universe, return is discernible. The very lives of Muslims are formulated, and mediated, by perhaps the greatest return of all, the Return to God. Sura Baqarah, verse 156, in the Qur'an reads: "We belong to Allah and it is to Allah that we shall return". And Sura A'raf, verse 29, reminds, "... Such as he created you in the beginning, so shall you return".

In all aspects of life, return is infinitely enacted and re-enacted as a sign of the supreme return to God. The very act of repentance (*tawbah*) is a turning, and a re/turning, to God and to His Grace. The Prophet Muhammad himself recommended saying '*atūbu ilayh*', 'I return to him', after uttering the more literal expression of repentance, the *istighfār*, namely '*astaghfirullāh*', I seek God's forgiveness. Indeed, so powerful is this concept, and this act, that the Almighty Himself uses its imagery in *Surat al-Baqarah*, verse 160, saying that He will show displeasure to those denying His signs and His guidance, "Except those who repent / And make amends and openly declare Truth: / To them I turn [*atubu alayhim*], for I am oft-Returning / and Merciful [*ana al-tawwabu al-rahim*].

The notion of return is implicit throughout the Quran but in many places it is also made explicit. When Musa (Moses) obeys the command of God to throw his staff, it turns into a snake. The miracle is not this transformation alone, it is also God's statement, in Sura TaHa, verse 21: "Do not fear, We shall return it to its previous state". This ability to return things to their original condition is everywhere to be found in the Quran and is a deliberate elaboration of God's power over change and transformation. Later in Sura 20, at verse 55, the same point is driven home:

“We created you from it [earth] / And we shall return you to it, / And from it we shall bring you forth yet again”.

Other examples of miraculous restoration can be found in the lives of the Prophets. Adam is reported to have been returned to Eve, and she to him, after repentance. This momentous return occasioned all of human history. The eyesight of the Prophet Jacob, diminished by the loss of his son, is restored by the shirt the Prophet Yusuf (Joseph) has asked his hitherto treacherous brothers to pass over their father’s eyes. Thus, the father, Jacob, is returned to his son, and the son, Joseph, now a ruler, is himself returned to his rightful station. And sight — a metaphor, surely, for wisdom, clarity, and order in the world — is returned to the ageing Jacob. Indeed, the Joseph story is not just a metaphor of disclosure and deceit, and of injury and justice, but also one of fall and return.

Perhaps the most miraculous returns are those of Jesus. His first return is to God, one that in the Quranic text presages the final return of all creation, described in Sura Āl ‘Imrān, verse 55:

“Then God said: “O Jesus! I will take you and raise you to Me / And clear you of the allegations of those who blaspheme; / I will make those who follow you / Superior to those who reject faith / Till the Day of Resurrection, / When you shall all return to me, / And when I shall judge between you the matters you dispute”.

The second return is the one signaled in Sura Zukhruf, verse 61, when God speaks of Jesus as follows: “He is a sign of the Hour”, which is elaborated upon by the commentators for its significance in ridding the Earth of the dreaded *Dajjāl*, or False Messiah. This return, that of Jesus, as the Quranic verse makes very clear, is portentous. In apocalyptic terms it marks the beginning of the end; but for the pious, I would point out, that it signals the advent of return.

In the case of Abraham, return is critical. His is the return of Prophecy to the site of divine attention, the valley of Bakkah, later known as Mecca. Here, Abraham builds the Ka'bah as a monument to the One God and here another return is re-enacted. In His wisdom, God inspires Abraham to sacrifice his son, Ishmael in the Muslim tradition, Isaac in the Biblical. Abraham and his son unquestioningly comply. At the final instant, God spares the obedient child. As in the Joseph and Jacob account, God returns son to father. Their compliance and that return is commemorated in one of the most celebrated re-enactments on Earth, the Hajj, itself a return to the valley of Bakkah, and itself the occasion of an Eid, the Eid al-Adha.

There, in the precincts of Mecca, where Eve was returned to Adam; where Ishmael was returned to Abraham; where Muhammad returned to give his farewell sermon on his own first, but also last, Eid; where Jesus shall return to oppose the most pretentious and Pretended of returns, that of the False messiah — there, the Quran posits that all humanity will one Day stand, and undergo the most enviable Return of all.

Eid Mubarak, and many happy returns.

Shawkat M. Toorawa