



Assalamu Alaykum

Dear Students,

I hope this letter reaches you with the best of health and Iman. Just sending a reflection.

I was privileged to go on the pilgrimage to Makkah (Mecca) some 14 years ago. My then-wife and I considered that Hajj was Fard (obligatory), while having children was Sunnah (an obligation less in obligation than a Fard). So, we decided that one of our first trips together would be the Pilgrimage. My advice to you is to have a sense of urgency regarding your own pilgrimage. Meaning, do it as soon as you are able, whether that is in your twenties, thirties, or older. Because the deadline to fulfill it is theoretically decades away, we tend to procrastinate and wait until we finally decide to go on the pilgrimage. Most of the people on my flight to the Middle East were 15+ years older than me.


In this note, think about all the different obligations, commemorations, and metaphors that take place with the Hajj. We know the many functions of the Hajj. Primarily, it is an obligation to Allah. Along with that, it is a commemoration of events in the life of the Prophet Muhammad -p-, including his early work as a Prophet -p- calling idol worshipers to monotheism, to his provoking of events that led to the great peace treaty of Hudaibiyya, to his sermon. We know that the specific steps are commemorations of the life of Ibrahim (Abraham) and family, peace be upon them. We also speak of the so-to-speak dress rehearsal for the Day of Judgment, where we congregate dressed in our death shrouds. At the same time, the Hajj is itself a great equalizer. Indeed, people attend the pilgrimage with various levels of comfort especially before and after, but still, during the specific events, everyone is very much at the same level, rich or poor.

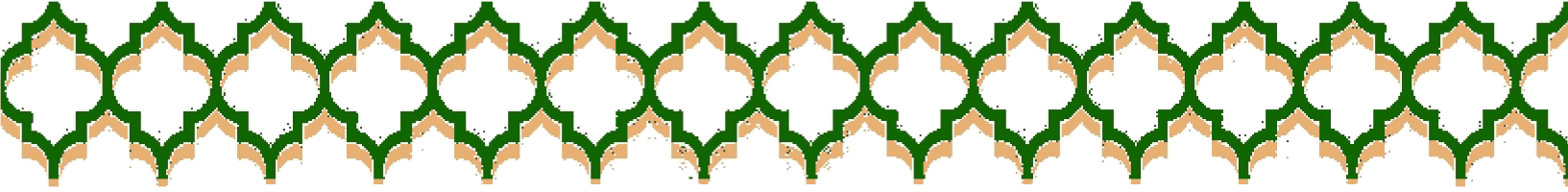
But, I wanted to speak about one element of the pilgrimage we tend not to look at: the commemoration of family.

All the major steps of the Pilgrimage, especially the lesser pilgrimage Umra, follow paths of the Prophets -p- in service to Allah, and they are each statements on family. We speed back and forth between the two hills Safa and Marwa. What are we recalling? A mother's love for her child. When Ibrahim was leaving Hajar and Isma'il in the barren valley we today call Makkah (Mecca), she asked him if Allah told him to leave them there. When he confirmed, she responded, saying with conviction that Allah will take care of them.

Now imagine this for yourself, even before speaking about them two. Over the course of your life, you will find yourself feeling alone in the middle of the wilderness of the world. If you allow yourself to feel abandoned, then it is easy in those moments to fall into despair. But, we do not have the privilege to fall into despair. It is not an option. You might even feel that way during the course of your studies. The key is to do what she did: she got up and started looking.

As we know, she put her young child down, and sped to the top of Safa, looking for any indication of sustenance. Nothing. She runs back to check on her child. Then she runs to the top of the other hill, Marwa, looking for anything. Nothing. She runs back to check on her child. As we know, she kept running back and forth. And, where did she find water? Underneath her son's feet. The point is that our sustenance and livelihood are there for us. But, we have to get up and go searching. We have to put in the struggle to find it.





But, as mentioned, that is also the struggle of a parent for her child. You will see when, Insha Allah, you are parents, that you will easily bend over backwards to give your child everything. And, for almost all of us, this is the case of our parents toward us. Nevertheless, even though we know it, we sometimes do need to hear words of affirmation and validation somewhere among the words of criticism and correction, but that is the subject of another discussion at another time.

And, consider the Ka'ba itself that we face in prayer, and walk around in another type of prayer. First built by Adam, peace be upon him. Washed away during the flood of Nuh, peace be upon him. Rebuilt by whom? Ibrahim and Isma'il. A father and son together, peace be upon them all.

Something to consider when, Insha Allah, you have children is that it is very easy to outsource your child's nurturing to other people. Make sure that as you develop in your career, and you find yourself working hard to give your child everything, that you are not so immersed in work (for your child) that you abandon your parenting of your child. That is the strange contradiction of our world, especially our suburban world. We work really hard to give our child everything, except for time with us. That immersion in the world is an upside plan. The is the nature of this world: as you dive deeper into it, you turn upside down.

But, we also know that there are limits to our love for our children. This process gets commemorated in the Stoning of the Jamarat. Ibrahim, peace be upon him, longed for a son. The answer to that prayer was Isma'il. But, then Allah tested him over his love for his Creator, against his love for his son. He was, as we know, instructed to slaughter his son. On the way, the accursed devil himself sought to tempt Ibrahim away from it.

Consider the temptation: Ibrahim was seeking to obey Allah. The devil was preaching to Ibrahim to not kill his son. In that moment, things were upside down, from a worldly perspective. And there, is a big lesson: obedience to the Divine, as embodied by the Prophet -p, is our standard for theology, morality, piety, and justice. Usually, universal notions of piety, morality, and justice will be one and the same with ours, but sometimes they will be in opposition. And, frequently popular notions will contradict Divinely-ordained practices, because popular notions are often informed by power and passion.

A deeper point to take from this ritual is that we sometimes fall into a sense of entitlement with our parents, as though they owe us something. And, yes, too many parents are too effective in making us feel as though we have no hope of salvation because we do such apparently poor jobs in serving them. Nevertheless, the world does not owe you anything, nor do your parents. Our obligations are to God. If we can make peace with this, interacting with the world, with them, with ourselves, and with the Divine will become easier. It will become easier to stand up, right side up.

And God knows best

May Allah bless you.

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