

Reflections from my Spiritual Journey to Makkah (Mecca)

By Owais Bayunus

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Kaabah (Mecca), The first House of God on Earth.

Hajj is considered the fifth pillar of Islam, meaning every Muslim who can afford it and is in good health has to perform Hajj (at least) once in his lifetime. Given below are the sentiments of Muslims while performing this duty to God, once in lifetime.

My very first recollection of people going to perform Hajj was in my childhood in Karachi, where all the pilgrims from Pakistan used to assemble at the harbor to board ships heading towards Saudi Arabia. There was a distinct difference between them and the rest of the people who were not going to Hajj. The men were all dressed in white, women well covered, and you could see children running around dressed similarly. They were more organized than other

people and always remained with their group, lest they get lost and be a problem for themselves and others.

When one of my father's friends went to perform Hajj, my father took me along to bid him farewell at the passenger ship. In those days, the rich pilgrims normally flew to Jeddah directly and the middle class and the poorer people would take a ship to Jeddah, a journey of almost seven days.

The ship was fully occupied by almost two thousand people, and it had a separate open place for the daily prayers. The impression of seeing these pilgrims remained on my mind for a long time, and whenever I would read about the pilgrimage to Makkah in books, I would remember seeing the same pilgrims.

Several years later, while I was on an assignment to Nigeria, I once drove near Niger's border south of Sahara. There, I came across a caravan, which, I was told, was heading towards Makkah for pilgrimage almost 18-20 months away. There are many such caravans in the Sahara heading to Makkah on camels and on foot, any time of the year. I remembered the saying "All roads lead to Makkah," which seemed to be true. Upon leaving Nigeria, I accepted an offer to teach in a University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Fortunately, it was very close to the Hajj season. So I decided to go there just in time to be able to perform this religious duty also.

After my plane landed at Jeddah Airport, I was taken in a bus to Makkah. For the first time, I felt, I was overwhelmed by my own emotions in anticipation of the holy journey and pilgrimage I was about to perform, a journey which every able-bodied Muslim should perform, if he can afford it, at least once in his lifetime. My eyes were looking for every detail of the contour of the land and every rock and stone which might be lying there from the time of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

When the bus was entering the city through the main highway, I could see the mountain on the top of which Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) had for the first time the encounter with Angel Gabriel which had changed the course of history. I recalled how he came back running to tell his wife about this experience.

The Story of Hajj

The story of Hajj began about 3,500 years ago, when the Prophet of God Ibrahim (pbuh), known in English as Abraham (pbuh), took his wife, Hajirah (Hagar), and their son, Ismael (Ishmael), to the valley of Baka'a near the Hills of Faran, and left them there, by God's command. Baka'a, now called Makkah, means a desolate place with no vegetation, and Faran (originally Paran) is the name of the hills on the western slopes of the Arabian Peninsula.

Greatly concerned with the thirst of the infant and of herself, Hajirah ran desperately in search for water and made seven trips back and forth between the nearby hills of Safa and Marwah. Allah (SWT) then caused Ismail to rub his feet against the sand and a spring of water, the water of Zamzam, came out. This spring has never stopped and water still gushes out of it, and, once upon a time, it was the only source of water for the City of Makkah. I have drenched myself several times with the water of Zamzam and drank it to my content.

In his later trip to meet his wife and son, God commanded Ibrahim (pbuh) to build the holy sanctuary of Kaaba, the very first house of God where One God (Allah) would be worshiped. Kaaba is a near-cubical, elevated room, covered by a black satin and velvet cloth. The Sacred mosque in Makkah is built around it.

Upon completing Kaaba, Ibrahim was asked by God to call out people to pilgrimage to that holy sanctuary. He replied that there were not many people around. God asked Ibrahim to call out people and they would come on even lean camels.

“Behold! We gave the site, To Ibrahim, of the (Sacred) House [Kaaba that he built], (Saying): ‘Associate not anything (In worship) with Me; And sanctify My House for those who compass it round, or those who stand up (in prayers), or bow, or prostrate themselves (Therein in prayer). And proclaim the pilgrimage among men: they will come to thee on foot and (mounted) on every kind of camel, lean on account of journeys through deep and distant mountain highways; (HOLY QURAN 22:26-27)”

So Ibrahim (pbuh) stood up and called out people to come for pilgrimage. Soon there were a few who joined him to purify themselves. From that day onward, as far as recorded history goes, every single year at the prescribed days people from near and far would go for pilgrimage to Makkah and its vicinity in response to the call of Ibrahim (pbuh).

But the tests of Ibrahim had not ended yet. Ibrahim (pbuh) then saw in dreams that he was asked to offer in sacrifice to Allah what he loved the most. When he had ascertained that it was not just a dream but a vision and true commandment from God, he told his son about the dream. “O my son! I have seen in a dream that I am sacrificing you on God’s command, so what do you think?” They both realized that this was an order from Allah. Ismael responded without any hesitation: “Father do what you have been commanded, you shall find me among the very patient InshaAllah.”

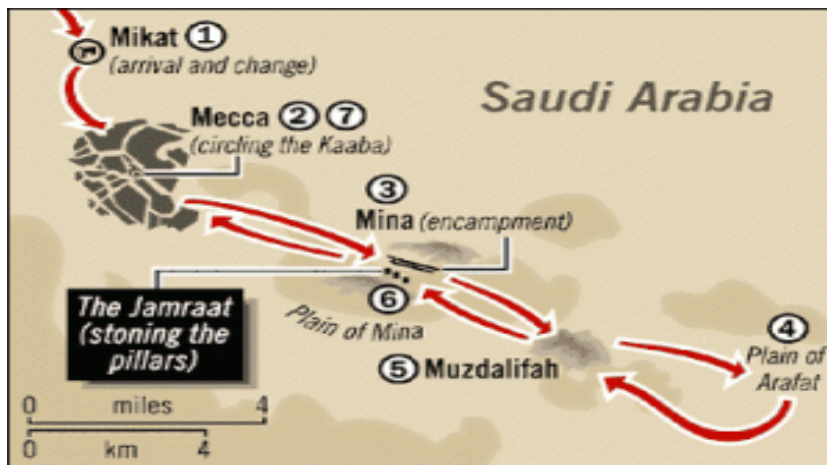
They both submitted to the will of Allah, Ibrahim walking ahead and the patient son following him. One was leading his most beloved treasure, the answer to his 90 years of prayers, for whom he had waited such a long time, ready to give back the gift of the first son to the One who had given him in the first place. He remembered every innocent move the son had made, and every smile on the child’s face, from birth to childhood. He did not want to look at Ismael for the love of him and was keeping his eyes away from him.

When Satan (the Devil) approached him and his son, and tried to reason out that what they were intending to do was wrong and logically incorrect, they hit him with stones and he went away depressed knowing that he (Satan) had his limitations and would not be able to deceive true men of God.

Ibrahim (pbuh) laid his son prostrate, put his forehead on the ground and covered his own eyes, lest the love of the son would overcome God's command, and directed a sharp knife towards his neck. At this very moment, Allah called him: "O Ibrahim! You have made your dream come true! Thus do We reward the good doers!" A big sheep was sent down from heaven to be slaughtered instead of Ismael, and they both had a big celebration that day. This event is celebrated every year by over a billion Muslims all over the world and is considered the most important festival of the year. It is Eid al-Adha when we slaughter the sacrificial sheep, and give one third of its meat to poor, one third to friends, and keep the remaining one third for our own home.

Hajj is the enactment of Ibrahim and his family's sacrifice and their love for God.

This promise of Allah, to send people from all over the world to Makkah, is fulfilled every single year in Arabia through the Muslims' yearly pilgrimage, where about three million Muslims come to perform the Hajj (pilgrimage) every year. The 'lean camel' coming after the fatiguing journey through distant mountain roads typifies the difficulties of travel.



**Movement of
Pilgrims**

Millions with Tears in Their Eyes

Looking at Kaaba for the first time is an experience hardly anyone can forget. When I looked at Kaaba, a

strange sensation passed through my spine and I stood still, gazing at it for some time. The Kaaba, which I had been seeing in pictures all my life and towards which I turned my face when praying five times a day, the House of

Almighty Allah on Earth, was right in front of me. I was stunned for a while.

Is this the place which Ibrahim and Ismael built thousands of years ago, the center of monotheism? I had read in books that the prayers you wish when you first see Kaaba are accepted by God. I had so many prayers that I wanted to ask but I had forgotten them all at that time. I just asked God to let me enter paradise upon my death and to accept any prayers when I would need them. Later I realized that these were excellent supplications to God.

I went close to Kaaba, kissed its velvet curtain, and kissed the black stone received by Ibrahim (pbuh) and revered by all Muslims. With literal tears in eyes overflowing with emotions, I circumambulated the Kaaba seven times, prayed near the mark of the footstep of Ibrahim, drank the water of Zamzam, and drenched myself with it. I ran between the hills of Safa and Marwah, remembering the passion and desperation of our mother Hajirah, left alone with her infant son in that desolate valley. I remembered how God watched over her.

I walked on the road, on which Ibrahim (pbuh) and Ismael (pbuh) had once walked to the scene of the greatest sacrifice a lover can give to his beloved God, the offer of the first son, (Ismael, Isma meaning heard, and El meaning God) who was born in response to Ibrahim's (pbuh) lifetime prayers. I remembered my own daughter at that time

and the love I had in my heart for her. I also thought of the Great Prophet Ibrahim (pbuh), who walked over the same passage that I was then walking, when his mind may have been telling him to do one thing and the heart full of love and submission to God another.

I also prayed at the unending flat land of Arafat and Jabale Rahmah and threw pebbles at the structure symbolizing Satan, as Ibrahim (pbuh) and Ismael (pbuh) had done. I slaughtered a sheep, thinking again of Ibrahim (pbuh) when he was sure he was going to sacrifice his son.

I prayed on the Mountain of Mercy in the ground of Arafat. Here, Adam and Eve had met for the first time after they had been sent down to earth from Heaven. Just imagine how happy they must have been seeing each other on Earth the first time. What is the probability of two human beings meeting on the surface of the earth within their lifetime, when one had been sent down to Jeddah (literally meaning grandmother) and the other to Sri Lanka?

It is an experience of a lifetime. The sea of men wrapped in the same two pieces of cloth with no marks, no distinction between the rich or the poor, king or the beggar, white or black or brown or yellow. All equal in the eyes of God. The Earth and its politics, its wealth and its name, seems to be a small thing when you feel so close to God.

I saw millions of men and women with tears in their eyes, ready to help with compassion. People who could speak only their native languages were full of love for others who they had never seen. I saw an old man, perhaps in his eighties, and his wife walking together slowly, one stepping after the other, with each other's help, hand in hand. You could hear people speaking Arabic, Urdu, English, French, Somali, Russian, Turkish, and Spanish; name any language of the world. And every one, in a low tone or loudly, chanting to God.

“God I am here, God I am here (to the call of Ibrahim which he made three thousand years ago). There is no God but You. All praises are for You and all blessings are from You and the whole World belongs to you. There is no partner in Your divinity.”

About the Author.



Owais Bayunus, former president of the Islamic Center of Minnesota (ICM) 2008-2010, is currently Director of Interfaith. He was also Chairman JRLC, (Joint Religious Legislative Coalition- A Muslim, Christian, Jewish Advocacy group for Peace and Justice in Minnesota Legislature), and former chairman of the Muslim Christian Dialogue, Minnesota Council of Churches and the Islamic center.(1995-2005)