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Pilgrims at Heart
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AS the pilgrims in Mecca complete the annual ritual of pilgrimage today, Muslims across the globe will begin the Id al-Adha, the three-day Feast of Sacrifice, in solidarity with them.

For Muslims seeking to make sense of the annual pilgrimage, a question arises: is the hajj only an elaborate ritual?

Hajj literally means, "to continuously strive to reach one's goal." The rite of visiting the sacred sites need be completed only once in a lifetime, but its meaning ought to be enduring. Yet, no pilgrim can claim strictly to imitate the Prophet Muhammad in this ritual. Such despotic literalness would only invest the observance with fraudulence. Is the imagination not at the heart of pilgrimage?

Centuries ago, the Arabic literary figure and philosopher, Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, who died in 1023, mused about what the pilgrimage might have meant for those who could not make it to Mecca. Sadly, we can now only mourn the lost text of Tawhidi, but there is more than a hint in his title: "Undertaking the Mental Pilgrimage When the Physical Pilgrimage Is Impossible."

Exile, sacrifice and atonement underscore the commandment of pilgrimage in Muslim religious life. The faithful re-enact the pilgrimage rituals in imitation of their spiritual forbears. They relive exile by treading in the footsteps of Abraham. But the hajj also recalls the temporary exile of Adam and Eve, who wandered the earth after their expulsion from paradise. According to Muslim tradition, Adam and Eve reconciled with God in the desert of Arabia. The spot where they met each other again and atoned - an obligatory destination for pilgrims - is called Arafat, from the Arabic word 'arafa, "to know."

The theme of knowing and imagining the divine is embroidered through the trials of Abraham and his family. After Abraham's first child, Ishmael, was born to his slave wife Hagar, he was confronted by the jealousy of his other wife, Sarah, who was then childless. God upgraded this domestic squabble into a legacy issue for the Patriarch and his admirers. But he ordered the dutiful Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael to Arabia.

Years later, Muslim tradition holds, Abraham reconciled with Hagar and Ishmael. But more trials awaited. This time Abraham had to do the unthinkable: sacrifice his son. Mainstream Muslim tradition believes that the son in question was Ishmael, while a minority view holds that it was Isaac, Sarah's son. But after a miraculous substitution of Ishmael (or Isaac) by a ram, Abraham's reputation was sealed as the "friend of God."

To express their loathing of evil, the pilgrims will participate in that ancient drama of Abraham and Ishmael. They will first stone three pillars, each symbolizing Satan's failed attempts to mislead Abraham's family. Then, in a place called Mina, meaning "desires," each pilgrim will sacrifice an animal. With this act they seek to replace their destructive desires with productive ones. Away from Mecca, non-pilgrims with means will also slaughter animals as a show of hospitality to friends, family and the indigent. Pilgrimage embodies exile by requiring seekers to suspend customary routine, enter new environments and live by new rhythms and rituals. For a limited time, pilgrims experience the transitions and dislocations exiles perpetually undergo. As a performance, the pilgrimage links people to a past shared by several Abrahamic traditions, just as, by bringing together Muslims from a great multiplicity of cultures, it celebrates the diversity of our common humanity. Pilgrims return home enriched by this cosmopolitan outlook, but with a new appreciation for their own origins.

In the 1980's, the Iranian revolution inspired some attempts to use the hajj as a platform to express Muslim grievances. But such efforts ended in 1987, when Iranian pilgrims clashed with Saudi authorities, resulting in carnage and mayhem.

The more subtle political significance of the hajj, however, persists in the realm of the spiritual imagination. To play on the words of the poet Federico Garc'a Lorca: the imagination hovers above ritual, the way fragrance hovers over a flower.

Pilgrimage ought to fire the imagination and celebrate transitions, creativity and innovation. And imagination is a weapon, one that tyrants and autocrats fear. If we find it in short supply in the corridors of power, that does not mean that the rest of us should be deprived of its constructive possibilities as well.

A prolific 13th century mystic, Ibn Arabi, wrote that pilgrims were mistaken if they believed that swarming like moths around the cube-like stone centerpiece, the Kaaba in the Holy Mosque, was the loftiest act of venerating God. Rather, noted Ibn Arabi, it was the human heart that deserved the highest sanctity. For neither the offerings made, nor the hardships endured, reaches the divine. Instead it is the compass of the heart that counts.

The heart symbolizes the inviolability of human dignity. But the supreme gift, Ibn Arabi artfully explains, is the imagination radiating from the heart. The fulcrum of the pilgrimage is also the essence of life: a caring heart fired by the imagination.

For instance, after paying homage to the two women Eve and Hagar in the rites of pilgrimage, how can some Muslims still violate the rights and dignity of women in the name of Islam? Is this not a contradiction? If the pilgrimage is done not by rote but with imagination, honor killings become unthinkably loathsome, a curse to be condemned like the Satan just stoned.

The truth of the imagination pertains today, not just for Tawhidi and Ibn Arabi, but also for all their contemporary successors who still believe the imagination to be the healing balm for our deeply troubled world.

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