



## **Fasting, fairness, friendship, fun and feeling fine: the roles of food in Islam**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The eating of and abstaining from food can be a means of generating empathy, understanding, and fairness between people, resulting in increased friendship between Muslims of all backgrounds, and between Muslims and non-Muslims, through social occasions and everyday kindness.

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There is not a creature that moves on earth whose provision is not his concern. He knows where it lives and its (final) resting place: it is all (there) in a clear record.<sup>1</sup>

### **Iftar: the opening**

As the sun sinks below the horizon, I inhale the scents of jasmine and honeysuckle and I feel that the natural world really is the most beautiful mosque in which to break my fast. I thank God, or Allah, for my food, my garden, my health, my family and so many other blessings, and I make a supplication for people in need who are on my mind. After a day which went by surprisingly quickly, I sometimes feel that it is hard to start eating again-as if my body has been 'switched off' to food. However I welcome the 'Iftar'. I say a special prayer for the break-fast, telling Allah that I have fasted for Him, and that I am breaking my fast with what He has provided for me, and in His name, and ask Him to bless my meal, before savouring each bite of the dates, and each sip of the milk. I try to make it a precious moment of tranquillity, and heightened nearness to God, whether I am alone or with company.

This is my ideal way to break the fast, whether in Ramadan (the month of daytime fasting) or at other times of voluntary fasting. This moment is called, in Qur'anic Arabic, the 'Iftar' or the 'opening', as is the first chapter or 'Surah' of the Holy Qur'an-*Al-Fatihah*-'The Opening'. The fasting, the prayers and the type of food I eat for 'Iftar' are all the same as those of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) over 1400 years ago, whose example I am trying to follow.

<sup>1</sup> Abdel Haleem M.A.S. (2004) (translator) *The Qur'an- A new translation*, New York: Oxford University Press, ch.11 vs.6



## **Fasting and food as ways of uniting the community and humanity**

You who believe, fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may be mindful of God.<sup>2</sup>

For most Muslims who are able to fast, the 'Iftar' is also a special moment. They have restrained themselves from food, drink, and marital affection since their small meal ('suhur') eaten just before the dawn, when, in most places, they heard the call to prayer, prayed the 'Fajr salat', and recited the Qur'an at the beginning of a new day. The day of restraint helped them to focus more upon seeking knowledge and mindfulness of God, and deeds that please God.

Even those not fasting, such as those who are pregnant, breast-feeding, old, sick or travelling a long way, try to make the most of Ramadan, in terms of Islamic practices. In return for their sincere efforts for the sake of Him, they are promised greater than usual rewards and forgiveness from God. These practices include doing charitable deeds to all, especially all in need, and being quieter, praying, supplicating and reading or reciting the Qur'an more than usual. They remember how the first verses of the Qur'an were given to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and how he was always made to recite all that he knew of the Qur'an in the presence of Angel Gabriel during the holy month of Ramadan until the final year of his life when it was completed.

Those fasting have felt a little of the hunger and suffering of so many human beings in drought, war or disaster-stricken areas, and learned to empathise more completely with them. They also realize that their suffering and problems are less than those of many other people, now and in the past. In many places they will hear the call to prayer or the 'adhaan' for the sunset ('Maghrib') prayer, arising from the minaret of the local mosque, which may become illuminated, the sign that they can now eat and drink.

### **Tunisian recipes for Ramadan**

In Tunisia the traditional food for after the sunset prayer in Ramadan is a soup called 'shurba'. It is made from small pieces of vegetables added in the last ten minutes of cooking to the pureed tomato and onions which have been both fried in olive oil and spiced with half a tablespoon each of salt, black pepper and red paprika pepper, and then boiled for about twenty minutes in water with small pieces of meat or fish. A handful of pasta or cracked barley is added before the last five minutes, as well as a sprinkling of fresh, chopped parsley right at the end. Usually accompanying the 'shurba' soup is 'brique', a flat shallow-fried, thin pastry-wrapped version of a samosa or spring roll, but usually containing egg, mashed potato, cheese, onions, tuna and parsley with salt and black pepper. Both 'shurba' and 'brique' are eaten with a squirt of fresh lemon juice and are light on the stomach. This leaves the person who has eaten them with enough energy to do the extra, longer, congregational 'Tarawih' prayers after the night prayer ('Isha'). Sometimes they may want to eat more food after the prayer, but usually they want to sleep!

During the last ten days of Ramadan, Muslims make an especially intensive effort, hoping for special blessings promised to them in return. Men in particular are encouraged to stay the night in the mosque spending a lot of time praying, supplicating and reciting and reading the Qur'an. Other people try to stay up at night in their houses doing similar acts of worship.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid ch2 vs. 183



**Fairness and friendship:  
Giving and sharing food**

In many mosques the meal for Iftar, or at least the dates accompanied by water or milk at the moment of sundown, is provided by mosque committees, or charities, to men and women who have performed the sunset prayer at the mosque. Some 'halal' (permissible) restaurants run by British Muslims will donate boxes of hot food to a particular mosque in their neighbourhood. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said that those giving food are promised forgiveness, and rewards from God equal to those given to each and every person who has fasted<sup>3</sup>, which are unlimited. Even if someone eats who has not been fasting, the donor of the meal is promised an abundant reward for his charity or 'sadaqah'<sup>4</sup>. One advantage of this is that it brings the hearts of givers and receivers, and rich and poor, closer together.

In places where there is obvious poverty and many people needing food, tables and chairs are sometimes set up outside the mosque in the street and food and drink are provided. Men and women usually pray and eat in different places in the mosque although they can both serve food to each other's areas. Muslims try to follow the Islamic guidance about controlling their tongues, summed up in the Prophet's (pbuh), 'Speak good or be silent'<sup>5</sup>, and try to emulate other good manners he (pbuh) encouraged.

**Giving money for food and other needs**

Community mealtimes are often used as a means to raise money for charities or helping with emergency relief, helping in sponsorship of orphans, poor families, or the development of projects for the needy in under-funded parts of the world. Before 'Eid ul Fitr' (the celebration of the opening of the fasts), the day after Ramadan, has ended, Muslim households all have to pay a special 'Zakat' or 'Sadaqat-ul Fitr' a charitable donation to poorer families, so that they can have good food for the day of 'Eid ul Fitr', and enjoy it along with all the other, better-off Muslims. The same occurs for 'Eid-ul Adha', (the celebration of the sacrifice) the last day of the pilgrimage, celebrated by all Muslims, regardless of whether they are on pilgrimage or not. Usually sheep ('Qurbani'), at home and on Hajj, are killed in remembrance of Prophet Abraham and Ishmael's devotion to God. One third of the meat is distributed to poorer families, so they can again be united in the celebration of the 'Eid'; one third is distributed amongst the wider family; the last third is for the immediate family.

The two 'Eids' are celebrations of goodness – one a celebration of the goodness of all those who have fasted, at the end of the month of fasting, Ramadan; and the other a celebration of all the people who have just made great efforts for the sake of pleasing God by performing the pilgrimage to Makkah, or 'Hajj'.

**Fun: food as a way of bringing together Muslims and non-Muslims**

**Community celebrations**

Anyone, Muslim or non-Muslim, can join in the community meals, be it an 'Eid'; a wedding celebration ('walima'); a birth celebration ('aqiqah'); or 'Iftar', whether they are fasting or non-fasting. Convergences of different cultures and religions occur at gatherings in schools, universities, mosques, community centres and homes in many parts of the world, opportunities to build friendships and taste all kinds of exotic food!

<sup>3</sup> Ibn Khuzaima Hadith (from Prophet Muhammad), quoted by Islahi, M.S. (1982) *Etiquettes of life in Islam*, Delhi: Markazi Maktaba Islami, p147

<sup>4</sup> Bukhari, & Muslim, *Sahih Hadith* (from Prophet Muhammad), narrated by Abu Hurayrah, quoted by Arif M., Azad I., Benkhelifa A., Driscoll, N., Jibaly M. (1999), *Authentic Etiquette of Eating and Hosting from the Qur'an and Sunnah*, Birmingham: Path to Knowledge Publishing p20

<sup>5</sup> Muslim & Bukhari (in part) *Sahih Hadith* (from Prophet Muhammad)



### Sharing food at any time

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) greatly encouraged Muslims to share food and drink with neighbours, at any time, in any situation. One of his many sayings on the subject is, 'Eat together and not alone, for blessings come with company'<sup>6</sup>. Even if you can't eat together, it is good to give part of your food to others. He said, 'Food for two persons is enough for three, and the food of three persons is enough for four.'<sup>7</sup> The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) encouraged Muslims, by words and example<sup>8</sup>, to join together with anyone who has good aims, whether they are standing up for and ensuring justice; spreading guidance and education in useful knowledge or skills; or caring for the environment.

### Feeling fine: food as a separating factor, and a disease

#### Sources of money to pay for the food

The food and drink consumed by Muslims should have been paid for in a permissible ('halal') way, ideally earned through hard work, and should not come from forbidden ('haram') sources. There are warnings given in Islam that forbidden sources of income will have bad consequences in this life and punishment in the next, if we persist in using them<sup>9</sup>.

#### Who is invited?

Muslims are discouraged from giving food to someone who has an impious, rebellious attitude towards God.<sup>10</sup> The Prophet (pbuh) told Muslims to invite only those of good character and mindfulness of God to have meals at their home<sup>11</sup>.

#### What to eat? Meat?

To ensure physical, emotional, and spiritual health, according to the Qur'an, any 'pure and wholesome flesh of the sea' is 'halal' (permissible), and so long as the meat of other animals does not fall into the forbidden categories, it is also permissible. It forbids meat from animals that have already died by falling, being strangled, gored, or killed by another animal. The Qur'an also forbids 'blood that is poured forth' and the meat and products of pigs. Meat killed without mentioning the name of God is also not allowed, especially meat dedicated to an idol. The Prophet (pbuh) told Muslims not to eat carnivorous animals with fangs<sup>12</sup> or claws that prey on other creatures, whether on land or in the sea, as well as reptiles, amphibians, elephants; donkeys, mules and asses; rats, scorpions and other dangerous pests, and all insects except locusts<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibn Majah Hadith (from Prophet Muhammad) narrated by Umar Ibn Al-Khattab, quoted by Arif M., Azad I., Benkhelifa A., Driscoll, N., Jibaly M. (1999), *Authentic Etiquette of Eating and Hosting from the Qur'an and Sunnah*, Birmingham: Path to Knowledge Publishing, p19

<sup>7</sup> Muslim Sahih Hadith (from Prophet Muhammad), narrated by Abu Hurayrah, quoted by Arif M., Azad I., Benkhelifa A., Driscoll, N., Jibaly M. (1999), *Authentic Etiquette of Eating and Hosting from the Qur'an and Sunnah*, Birmingham: Path to Knowledge Publishing, p20

<sup>8</sup> Al-Ghazali M.(1998?)' *Fiqh us-Seerah Understanding the life of Prophet Muhammad*, Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House and the International Islamic Federation of Student Organisations

<sup>9</sup> Bukhari Sahih Hadith (from Prophet Muhammad), quoted by Islahi, M.S. (1982) *Etiquettes of life in Islam*, Delhi: Markazi Maktaba Islami, p146

<sup>10</sup> Minhaaj Al-Qaasideen Hadith (from Prophet Muhammad), quoted by Arif M., Azad I., Benkhelifa A., Driscoll, N., Jibaly M. (1999) *Authentic Etiquette of Eating and Hosting from the Qur'an and Sunnah*, Birmingham: Path to Knowledge Publishing, p22

<sup>11</sup> Abu Dawood, At-Tirmidhi Hadith (from Prophet Muhammad), quoted by Arif M., Azad I., Benkhelifa A., Driscoll, N., Jibaly M. (1999), *Authentic Etiquette of Eating and Hosting from the Qur'an and Sunnah*, Birmingham: Path to Knowledge Publishing p.21

<sup>12</sup> Bukhari Sahih Hadith (from Prophet Muhammad) narr. Abu Thalaba

<sup>13</sup> Halal Monitoring Committee (last updated 2009), *Halal Food- A clear explanation*, Internet: at <http://www.halal mc.co.uk> (accessed 9-05-2009)



The Islamic method of slaughter ('dhaha' or sacrifice) minimizes the pain and suffering of the animal<sup>14</sup>, and the amount of blood that remains in its meat. The animal must be as calm as possible, well-watered, and oblivious to the fact that it is to die. The knife must be sharp, but not be sharpened in front of the animal. The animal is held down firmly and its neck is slit very quickly and quietly from behind in one manual movement, cutting off the blood supply to the brain and therefore all sensation and pain is immediately prevented. The heart continues to pump out most of the animal's blood for a few minutes. At the moment of slaughter the people performing it must recite: 'Bismillah' ('in the name of God), and 'Allahu akbar' ('God is greater (than us)')<sup>15</sup> to remind us that we are given by God this power to take life in order to sustain our own, and to be humble and grateful before God.

If no food killed in an Islamic way is available, then Muslims are also permitted (it is legally 'halal' for them) to eat Jewish Kosher meat, or the non-pig meat of the 'people of the book' (Christians and Jews), as it is understood that the meat would be clean and killed in a manner close to the Islamic method.

However, all these best and proper practices are hard to achieve in the pace of today's slaughter-houses, even those run by Muslims. If Muslims do not eat permissible food, they are warned they will not have their supplications answered and will be punished in the next life. Vegetarian food is however always 'halal', especially if it is organic.

### **Intoxicants**

With intoxicants and gambling, Satan seeks only to incite enmity and hatred among you, and to stop you remembering God and prayer. Will you not give them up?<sup>16</sup>

Muslims are expressly forbidden from drinking alcohol, or taking drugs themselves, and from encouraging others to do so. Muslims are forbidden from even sharing the table with someone who is taking intoxicating substances, or from passing these to them.

### **Food as a medicine**

#### **Food that is wholesome and pure**

O you people! Eat of what is on Earth (that which is) lawful and good<sup>17</sup>  
..and be grateful to Allah (God) if it is Him you worship.<sup>18</sup>

The food, besides being 'halal', should be 'tayyib' which means healthy, pure, nourishing and wholesome, as Muslims are told that their body is a trust from God, has rights and we are accountable for caring for it.

<sup>14</sup> El-Awady A. (last updated 02-02-2003) *Is Islamic slaughtering cruel to animals?* IslamOnline.net at [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/satellite?c=Article\\_c&cid=1157365866876&pagename=Zone-English-HealthScience%2FHSELayout](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/satellite?c=Article_c&cid=1157365866876&pagename=Zone-English-HealthScience%2FHSELayout) (last accessed 10-05-2009)

<sup>15</sup> Benlafquih C. (last up-dated 17-10-2008) *Ritual slaughter in Islam- Islamic slaughter is humane and produces healthy meat* at [http://islamic-practices.suite101.com/article.cfm/ritual\\_slaughter\\_in\\_islam\\_dhabihah](http://islamic-practices.suite101.com/article.cfm/ritual_slaughter_in_islam_dhabihah) (last accessed 10-05-2009)

<sup>16</sup> Abdel Haleem M.A.S. (translator) (2004) *The Qur'an- A new translation*, New York: Oxford University Press, p76

<sup>17</sup> Ali, Y.A. (translator) (1991) *The Meaning of The Holy Qur'an- new edition with revised translation and commentary*, Maryland, USA: Amana Corporation, ch. 2 vs.168

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. ch. 2 vs.172



## Prevention and cure

There is actually a whole book, called the *Tib an-Nabbi*<sup>19</sup>, containing the advice given by the Prophet (pbuh) and other Muslims regarding different types of food, drink and herbs that the Prophet (pbuh) and his companions used to prevent and treat different ailments. He (pbuh) said, 'If any one of you is sick, and he has an appetite for something, then he should eat it'<sup>20</sup>. It is Islamic to say, as the famous Greek founder of western medicine Hippocrates did, 'Let food be your medicine and let medicine be your food'. Harith ibn Khalada, a physician of the Arabs, added that most illnesses also come from wrong eating and drinking, especially from 'the entry of food upon food', and eating when not hungry<sup>21</sup>. Islam in general always promotes moderation and self-restraint, as it is better for us; others do not go without because of us; and food is not wasted. In the Qur'an it says 'Waste not by excess, for Allah loves not the wasters', and 'Eat and drink but not excessively.'<sup>22</sup>

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, 'The human being cannot fill a container worse than his stomach. For a human being, a few mouthfuls are sufficient to keep his back straight, but if he cannot bear this, then he should reserve one-third (of his stomach) for his food, one third for his drink, and one third for his breathing'<sup>23</sup>

The Prophet (pbuh) ate meat very seldom, when it was given to him or at celebrations, and in both situations he ate very little of it himself, distributing it and sharing it with others around him. Most of the time he subsisted on dates, milk, water and barley bread<sup>24</sup>, although he was pleased when he had the opportunity to eat meat and vegetables, fruit, and sweets made from butter, honey, nuts, raisins etc. The cow and bee respectively are mentioned in the Qur'an:

And in livestock, too, you have a lesson. We give you a drink from the contents of their bellies, between waste matter and blood, pure milk, sweet to the drinker. From the fruits of date-palms and grapes you take sweet juice and wholesome provisions. There truly is a sign in this for people who use their reason. And your Lord inspired the bee, saying, 'Build yourselves houses in the mountains and trees and what people construct. Then feed from all the produce of the earth and follow the ways made easy by your Lord'. From their bellies comes a drink of different colours in which there is healing for people. There truly is a sign in this for people who think.<sup>25</sup>

## Food as a symbol

Another of His Signs is this: You see the earth lying desolate, but when We send water down to it, it stirs and grows. He who gives it life will certainly give life to the dead. He has power over everything.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>19</sup> As- Suyuti J.D.A.R. (translator) (1994), *As-Suyuti's Medicine of the Prophet (Tib an-Nabbi)*, London, UK: Ta-ha Publishers

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p137

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p12

<sup>22</sup> Abdel Haleem M.A.S. (translator) (2004) *The Qur'an- A new translation*, New York: Oxford University Press, ch.6 vs141 and ch.7 vs. 31

<sup>23</sup> An-Nasa'I & at-Tirmidhi Hadith (from Prophet Muhammad) quoted by As- Suyuti J.D.A.R. (translator) (1994), *As-Suyuti's Medicine of the Prophet (Tib an-Nabbi)*, London, UK: Ta-ha Publishers, p11

<sup>24</sup> Bukhari & Muslim Sahih Hadith (about Prophet Muhammad) narr. A'ishah bint Abu Bakr Siddiq quoted by Arif M., Azad I., Benkhelifa A., Driscoll, N., Jibaly M. (1999), *Authentic Etiquette of Eating and Hosting from the Qur'an and Sunnah*, Birmingham: Path to Knowledge Publishing, p34

<sup>25</sup> Abdel Haleem M.A.S. op.cit., ch. 16 vs. 66-69

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. ch. 41 vs.39



In the Qur'an, the production of food from the earth when watered by the rain sent by God is a potent symbol of the positive, creative life given to the soul by the knowledge that comes from God. This symbolism is recognizable in a famous saying of Jesus. When challenged by the temptations suggested by Satan while fasting in the desert, according to the New Testament of the Bible, he (pbuh) responded with, 'Man cannot live on bread alone; he lives on every word that God utters'<sup>27</sup>. In Islam the 'Word' of God means the commands and laws of God and it seems clear that this is what Jesus (pbuh) meant when we read his other words quoted in the Bible<sup>28</sup> and the Qur'an.

### Conclusion

On the whole, food is more of a unifying than a dividing force in Islam. Food, sharing in the eating of it and abstaining from it, can be a means of generating empathy, understanding, and fairness between people, resulting in increased friendship between Muslims of all backgrounds, and between Muslims and non-Muslim friends. Reflecting on our experiences with and without food can help us to become more grateful to God, for what He provides, and to make greater efforts to please Him. The meeting of minds over food can help to boost charitable and constructive aims and projects, creating further unity. The result can be that all involved find that they are spiritually, emotionally and physically feeling fine!

### Useful reading and resources

#### Books

- Al-Ghazal Dr.S.K. (2006) *Medical miracles of the Qur'an*, Markfield, Leicestershire, UK: The Islamic Foundation
- Delago L. (2006) *Halal Food, Fun and Laughter*, Muslim Writers Publishing
- DeLorenzo, Y.T. (translator) (1997) *Imam Bukhari's book of morals and manners*, Alexandria & Virginia: Al-Saadawi Publications
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<sup>27</sup>The New English Bible with Apocrypha (1961) *Matthew, New Testament*, UK: Oxford University Press & Cambridge University Press, ch.2 vs.4

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. ch.5 vs17-20