A Picture is Worth 1,000 Words: Enhancing a Sense of Community During Ramadan

by Jeffrey Smith
Photograph by the Author

Ramadan, meaning extremely hot and dry in Arabic, is the Islamic world’s most important holiday. Not only is the 30-day period of fasting and self-denial a time for personal reflection and re-commitment to one’s faith, but it is also a season that fosters a sense of community and enhances interpersonal relations.

The purpose of fasting during Ramadan (a.k.a. Ramazan in Turkish) is to establish a closer connection with Allah by practicing restraint and humility. To facilitate that self-reflection, able-bodied Muslims are to refrain from eating and drinking (including water) as well as personal pleasures (e.g. smoking and engaging in sexual relations) between sunrise and sunset. The practice may sound familiar to select Christian groups who practice a somewhat different ritual during Lent. Exceptions to fasting are granted to young children, pregnant or breast-feeding women, the sick and elderly, as well as anyone who is traveling. As children grow older they customarily increase the number of hours they fast each year so that when they reach puberty (age 12 for girls and 14 for boys) they are fully participating in the self-denial practices of Ramadan.

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar and like other Muslim holidays (e.g. Hajj), is linked to the lunar cycle. Therefore, Ramadan occurs eleven days earlier each solar calendar year. In the northern hemisphere, when Ramadan coincides with the summer solstice (June 21st), locations such as Istanbul, Turkey (41° N) experience 15 hours of daylight. In 2013 Ramazan fell between July 9th and August 7th meaning that Istanbul residents not only endured fasting for 14 hours of daylight, but as

Figure 1. Waiting for iftar to begin, Istanbul, Turkey.
temperatures pushed above 32°C (90°F), the abstinence from food and water created serious health risks. Imagine the repercussions of having a job that demands strenuous physical labor—it is evident that Ramadan is not for the faint of heart.

The fasting period starts after a predawn meal (sahur) and ends when fast is broken with iftar (the meal that immediately follows sunset). It is tradition for iftar to commence with a drink of water followed by a dried date. The palm date symbolically represents the same, humble source of food that Prophet Muhammad ate when he broke fast. In some households the date is held at fork-point and a spoken offering is made to Allah and Muhammad.

In middle-class Turkey iftar is usually a substantial meal reminiscent of Thanksgiving in the U.S. Each evening during Ramazan family and friends gather in large groups to share a feast. On subsequent nights the family and another subset of friends will meet at a different house, similarly spread out over multiple nights. Imagine cooking from scratch for a large crowd and not being permitted to sample the food for taste as you prepare the dishes. Not only does the amount of food eaten compensate for the calories lost during daylight hours, but the event nourishes personal relations and adds to a sense of community. As Ramazan draws to a close, family members living afar return home and the social gatherings become much larger.

A common alternative to gathering in private homes is for groups of family and friends to meet at a restaurant. As first-time visitors to Turkey, we were repeatedly astounded as we witnessed this amazing cultural experience. The photo was taken at 8:15pm (17 minutes before iftar officially began) at a popular restaurant in suburban Istanbul. Here is how the scene unfolded.

During Ramazan most restaurants offer menus limited to a handful of options, but portions are large and seemingly endless. As sunset approaches, every square centimeter of space on long, family-style tables is filled with an over-abundance of breads, chilled foods (e.g. salads and fruits), bottled water, and pitchers of Ayran (Turkey’s national drink — a yogurt-based beverage). As minute by minute begrudgingly passes toward sunset, one can almost feel the hungry anticipation that fills the air. As soon as the call to prayer proclaims the end to the day’s fast, people gulp a large glass of water, devour a date, and attack the plates of food. All semblance of polite behavior is forgotten as trays full of shaved meats (iskender), steaming rice, and skewered kebabs (pilic sis) arrive at the tables.

As the clanking of dishes replaces all but the most direct conversation, the silence that descends upon the dining room is startling. At this restaurant, the staff serves well over 500 people simultaneously each night during Ramazan. We felt empathy for the young waiters who scurry around feeding the famished flock while their own bellies were probably just as empty after a long day without food and water. It is not difficult to understand that despite fasting over a 30 day period of time, many of the people in the room will actually gain weight during Ramazan. As bellies become full and eating comes to an end, conversation slowly fills the air. The rich sense of community returns. Table talk turns to family stories and interpersonal relations as people leisurely sip tea and finish off various Turkish sweets (e.g. baklava and ice cream).

When Ramazan falls during the warm, summer months it is customary for Turkish people to gather in public spaces (e.g. parks, pedestrian malls, and sidewalk cafes) to continue the celebratory spirit. After the young children head off to bed, adults stay up most of the night visiting. As the end of night approaches, followers are notified by the muezzin (leader of the call to prayer) of their last chance to eat a nighttime meal (sahur). The sahur is followed by the fajr (predawn call to prayer) and sunrise when fasting begins anew. Because practicing adults do not eat lunch during midday, it is common for business to slow down as most people take a nap to catch up on some of the sleep they missed the night before. Overall, Ramazan provides a big economic jolt to the local economy. Considerable money is spent preparing feasts and parties and dining out. Unlike Christmas which always falls at the end of December, Ramadan is celebrated eleven days earlier each year so the boost to the economy is gradually spread throughout the year.

In Istanbul, Ramazan is widely practiced but there is still a substantial proportion of the population that does not fast. Outside Istanbul, however, it is rare to find people not participating in all aspects of Ramazan (fasting and celebrations). Locals explained that Ramazan brings everyone together; everyone feels the pain of hunger and everyone enjoys the pleasures of family and friends.

Acknowledgements

This article was possible because of support from the Institute for Interfaith Dialogue, babacigim, and my wife.