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The Holy Month of Ramadan: A Month When Allāh's Servants are Invited to be His Special Guests

The Holy Prophet (s) is reported to have said:

...وَهُوَ شَهْرٌ دُعِيتُمْ فِيهِ إِلَى ضِيَاةِ اللَّهِ...

“...It is a month in which you have been called to the banquet of Allāh...1”

Whenever we speak of *diyāfa*, we refer to the invitation commonly known and highly encouraged in Islam. Our traditions are replete with emphasis on inviting the believers and feeding them in the way of Allāh (SwT). In fact a guest is also commonly known as ‘the beloved of God’. So much emphasis has Islam laid upon such invitation, that there is a prophetic tradition that says:

الضَيْفُ دَلِيلُ الْجَنَّةِ.

“A guest is a guide to Paradise.2”

In other words, serving a guest is so rewarding that it leads one to Paradise. This dictum also informs us that our hospitality should be such that it should qualify for such a reward. In other words, our invitation should not involve things that instead of making us closer to Allāh (SwT), separate us from His neighborhood.

In another tradition narrated from the Holy Prophet (s), ‘disliking a guest’ is equated to disliking Allāh (SwT):

...إِنَّ مَنْ أَبْغَضَ الضَّيْفَ فَقَدْ أَبْغَضَ اللَّهَ، وَمَنْ أَبْغَضَ اللَّهَ أَبْغَضَهُ اللَّهُ...

“...surely whosoever hates a guest, hates Allāh, and whosoever hates Allāh, Allāh [likewise] Hates him...”³

Those who assume a Divine spirit always love guests. One of the most outstanding prophets of Allāh well-known for his great fondness of serving guests is Prophet Ibrāhīm (‘a). History tells us that he would not eat any of his meals until he found a guest to eat with. At times he would have to travel one or two miles away just for this purpose. Due to his great fondness for guests, he was called Abū Adyaf. Imām al-Sādiq (‘a) is reported to have said: ‘Indeed Ibrāhīm was Abū Adyaf (lit. father of guests); and whenever he had no guest, he would go out searching for them⁴.

He is also known to be the first Prophet of Allāh⁵ to have served a guest. Imām ‘Alī (‘a) is reported to have said:

كَانَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ أَوَّلَ مَنْ أَضَافَ الضَّيْفَ...

“Prophet Ibrāhīm (‘a) was the first to host a guest...”⁶

Perhaps the reason why the Holy Prophet (s) and the infallible Imāms of the Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) highly encouraged the believers to invite each other for *iftar* in the Holy month of Ramadān was to adopt a Divine Attitude in themselves: In the same way as He has invited His believers to His Banquet and venerated them as well, His followers should adopt the same attitude. A very important point to bear in mind is that every invitation should accompany veneration (*ikrām*). In several traditions the phrase ‘*ikrām al-dayf*’ has often been mentioned. This means that no ordinary entertainment is encouraged. One must struggle to observe ‘*ikrām*’ (lit. veneration). The Holy Qur’ān alluding to this trait of Prophet Ibrāhīm (‘a) says:

هَلْ أَتَاكَ حَدِيثُ ضَيْفِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ الْمُكْرَمِينَ

“Did you receive the story of Abraham’s honored guests?”⁷

Some exegetes of Qur’ān allude to the fact that the adjective ‘*al-mukram*’ in the above verse possibly signifies that the guests of Ibrāhīm were honored by him and hence are qualified as ‘honored’⁸.

Veneration should be manifested in all the levels of the invitation. We should therefore identify ‘the etiquette of the intention of our invitation’, ‘the method of invitation’, ‘the banquet served in the invitation’, ‘the method of serving the banquet’, ‘where should the meal be served’, etc. Islam has the answers to all these queries.

Veneration in the phases of every invitation, however, does not mean that one should overspend to ensure that the best meal is served. It rather means to serve within the bounds of the *shar’ah* according to one’s capacity. It is noteworthy that when some of the poor companions of the Holy Prophet (s) asked him whether they would be deprived of the reward of invitation if they cannot bear the expenses of hosting a *mu’min* brother in this holy month, the Holy Prophet (s) said: ‘*Protect yourself from Hell Fire even with a piece of date or a glass of water*’, thus indicating that it is not necessary for one to serve what is beyond one’s capacity.

This however should not lead one who can afford to serve a decent meal to decide that he can be the host of so many believers by distributing dates in the mosque, and thereby earn much more reward than if he were to call one *mu’min* brother and serve a decent meal at home. In short, one should serve according to his financial capacity.

One of the most significant attitudes we must adopt is to create a meaningful environment in our invitations. Not only should physical food be served, intellectual and spiritual food should also be served. Able speakers on significant issues that deal with self-reform or reforming the society can be invited to serve such spiritual meals. It is then that we may be able to claim to have adopted a Divine attitude in this holy month. In fact, the great scholars of gnosis have clearly stated that ‘the Divine Banquet’ to which the believers have been called in the Holy month of Ramadān is ‘a spiritual’ repast.

In order to capture an accurate concept of the relation between the host and the guest, it would be useful for us to have a cursory glance over how lexicographers define this relation:

1. al-Iqbāl, vol. 1, pg. 26

2. Bihār al-Anwār, vol. 75, pp. 460–461.

3. al-Mahajjat al-Baydī, vol. 3, pg. 32.

4. Tafsīr Nūr al-Thaqalayn, vol. 1, pg. 555.

5. It should be noted that ‘first’ here is in terms of time. Otherwise, it is the Muhammadan light in terms of the existential hierarchy, who by Divine permission, is the first host. This again is in terms of the world of ‘contingent existence’. Otherwise there is none save Allāh Who is and was and will be the Host, and ‘a second’ to such a Host cannot be comprehended at all.

6. Bihār al-Anwār, vol. 12, pg. 4.

7. Holy Qurʿān, 15:24

8. See Tafsīr Majmaʿ al-Bayān, vol. 9, pg. 23 and Tafsīr al-Kashshāf, vol. 4, pg. 401.

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