



The Obligation to Fast

“O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those who came before you; that you will guard yourselves (against evil) Fast a certain number of days, but if any one of you is ill or on a journey, let him (break his fast), and fast the same number of days later on. And for those who can afford it there is a ransom: the feeding of a man in need. But he that does good of his own accord, it is better for him, but to fast is better for you, if you did but know. The month of Ramadan in which the Quran was revealed, a guidance for mankind, (a book of) clear proofs of guidance and the criterion (distinguishing right from wrong). Therefore whoever of you is present in that month let him fast.”

This passage from Surah Al-Baqarah was revealed in the second year of Hijrah and it made fasting obligatory. The word ‘sawm’ is singular of ‘siyam’ – fasting, and it literally means ‘to stop the ego from getting what it desires.’ However, in shariah it refers to abstention from eating, drinking and sexual activities from dawn till dusk, with the intention of devotion to Allah the Almighty. Amongst all Islamic worships it is one which really tests a persons power of endurance and ability to control his various physical appetites. Fasting is thus an act to surrender to the Lord, it is not self-torture, the devotee consciously hands himself over to the Lord. When ﷻ, Al-Hakim (the All Wise) commands His servants to fast, an historic fact is told, namely that the previous people were also obliged to do so, thus allaying fear of any difficulty.

This is further followed by giving a reason why fasting has been prescribed – so that you may become God fearing, ‘Muttaqee’. This is not an apology, for the Lord is All-Powerful and Eternal, it is to comfort and satisfy the devotee so that he can fulfil the Divine command with joy and dedication.

What is Taqwa? – ‘Fear of God’. Taqwa literally means ‘to protect oneself from those things that cause harm.’ So Taqwa is a sense of awareness, being on ones guard, and being vigilant and attentive lest one falls into the temptations of the ego and the shaitan. We must show this high level of alertness in our everyday life as Ibrahim bin Adham says,

“Tawqa is that people do not find a fault in your speech, and the angels do not find a fault in your actions whilst the angels of the throne see no fault in your inner motives.”

How does fasting develop Taqwa? “Imagine you are fasting and it is a sweltering afternoon, and you are extremely thirsty and your stomach is grumbling with pangs of hunger, no one is watching you, there is sweet cold water in the jug and delicious food on the table, not only do you not lift your hands towards the drink and food but you dare not raise your eyes at them. Isn’t the reason simply because it’s the Lord’s command? Now that you can avoid the unlawful things, do you think that you will be able to avoid all the other things that your Lord as forbidden? The objectives of this months long exercise is that you may avoid sins in the other eleven months of the year” (Zia Ul Quran)

Fasting has many benefits both spiritual and more immediate material rewards; it is an effective means for spiritual growth, moral development, and social good and has health benefits too.

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ
عَلَيْكُمْ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ
لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٨٣﴾ أَيَّامًا مَّعْدُودَاتٍ فَمَن كَانَ مِنكُم مَّرِيضًا أَوْ عَلَى سَفَرٍ فَعِدَّةٌ مِّنْ أَيَّامٍ أُخَرَ وَعَلَى الَّذِينَ يُطِيقُونَهُ فِدْيَةٌ طَعَامُ مَسْكِينٍ فَمَن تَطَوَّعَ خَيْرًا فَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَّهُ وَأَن تَصُومُوا خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٨٤﴾ شَهْرُ رَمَضَانَ الَّذِي أُنزِلَ فِيهِ الْقُرْآنُ هُدًى لِّلنَّاسِ وَبَيِّنَاتٍ مِّنَ الْهُدَى وَالْفُرْقَانِ فَمَن شَهِدَ مِنكُمُ الشَّهْرَ فَلْيَصُمْهُ وَمَن كَانَ مَرِيضًا أَوْ عَلَى سَفَرٍ فَعِدَّةٌ مِّنْ أَيَّامٍ أُخَرَ يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ بِكُمُ الْيُسْرَ وَلَا يُرِيدُ بِكُمُ الْعُسْرَ وَلِتُكْمِلُوا الْعِدَّةَ وَلِتُكَبِّرُوا اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ مَا هَدَىٰكُمْ وَلَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿١٨٥﴾

Surah Al-Baqarah, Ayaat 183-185