Ramadan and Shavuot

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According to a Hadith cited by ibn Kathir in elucidating Qur'an 2:185; Ramadan is a very special month because this one month in the Islamic lunar calendar was the same month when four of God's books of revelations were sent down to four special Prophets: Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad.

Ibn Kathir states: Imam Ahmad reported Wathilah bin Al-Asqa` said that Allah's Messenger said: “The Suhuf (Pages) of Ibrahim were revealed during the first night of Ramadan. The Torah was revealed during the sixth night of Ramadan. The Injil was revealed during the thirteenth night of Ramadan and Allah revealed the Qur'an on the twenty-fourth night of Ramadan.” (Ahmad 4:107 and Musnad 177025).

I do not know how Christians would understand the revelation of the Injil on the thirteenth day of Ramadan, but the Jewish holy day of Shavuot, which commemorates the giving of the Torah to Moses and Banu Israel, falls on the sixth day of the Jewish month of Sivan, which in that year must have coincided with Ramadan.

Without this Hadith it would not be obvious that these four history changing revelations, which happened so many centuries apart, actually occurred in the same lunar month because Jews, who also use the lunar calendar for all their religious dates, modify the length of the year with a leap month seven times in every nineteen year cycle, so as to always keep the harvest pilgrimage festival of Hajj Sukkot in the fall harvest season.

But in 2016, 2017 and 2018, Shavuot will be celebrated by Jews throughout the world at the same time that Muslims throughout the world are celebrating Ramadan. This only happens nine or ten times in a solar century; so I pray that some Imams and Rabbis will be stimulated by the co-occurrence of Ramadan and Shavuot to include some programs which offer insight into each others Sacred Scriptures.

To start this process, I offer a Jewish teaching about God's giving the Torah to Moses and Banu Israel at Mount Sinai, beginning with a Rabbinic teaching (called a Midrash) which elucidates a Biblical verse about the Jewish people who were standing at Mount Sinai; which is also mentioned twice in the Qur'an.

For mystically inclined Jews, a wedding is a reenactment by two individuals of the holy covenant first entered into by God and Israel at Sinai, when God and Israel first chose each other. God chose Israel saying, “You shall be a special treasure for me,,, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:4-5). The Jewish people chose God by answering: “All that the Lord has spoken **we will do”.** (Exodus 19:8).

Or as the Talmud puts it, “The groom, the Eternal One, is betrothed to the bride, the community of Israel.” (Talmud Pesachim 106b) Torah is the Ketubah (marriage contract) between the two covenanted partners. Mitsvot (commandments) are their daily loving interactions. Torah study and worship are the pillow talk between God and Israel. Tikunim: Kabbalistic mystical exercises, meditations and marital sexuality are the intimacies of married life.

Thus, when the Song of Songs refers to the “crown that Solomon's mother made for him on the day of his wedding”; the Mishnah (Ta'anit 4:8) glosses 'his wedding day' to mean 'the day of the Giving of the Torah' And when Rashi (Ta'anit 26b) glosses 'his mother' to mean 'his people'; Rashi means Israel crowned God as God by saying “we will do” , just as the bride makes the groom into a husband by accepting a ring and saying 'I do'.

Thus, every Jew, in every generation, can and should feel like he or she is a spiritual beloved and a spiritual lover of God, as Prophet Hosea proclaims: “I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in loving kindness and in compassion. I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness and you shall know the Lord”. (Hosea 3:21:22)

Most rabbis could not conceive that the Jewish people could have hesitated when God offered them the opportunity to become partners with God. But the Torah itself faithfully records the frequent mood swings and ambivalences felt by the Jewish peoplein the weeks folowing the Exodus from Egypt. God's proposal at Mount Sinai was the most awesome offer they had ever received.

If many people today have a problem making a long term commitment, what about people who had been slaves only three months earlier. Some said yes right away. Others thought about it for many hours. After close to a full day, almost all of them were ready to make a commitment, but a few were still undecided. A small minority still held out. So would the fear of making a commitment by an ambivalent few, keep everyone else from accepting God's proposal of a lifetime partnership?

Fortunately, God came to the rescue. According to Rav Avdimi: “The Holy One, who is blessed, lowered the [uprooted] mountain over them like a bucket, and said to them, ‘If you accept the Torah, fine; but if not, here will be your grave.” (Talmud Shabbat 88a) Sometimes, the ardor of the proposal makes all the difference.

The Qur'an refers to this incident: “We raised the Mountain over you saying: Hold firm to what we have given you, and study its commandments; so that you may attain piety towards God, (as God lovers) and His protection (as God's beloveds).” (2:63)

The whole nation's fate stands under the shadow of mount Sinai, and this explains the miracle of all Israel agreeing to the covenant. This may be the reason why Musa is the only prophet whose book comes not from angel Gabriel, but directly from Allah.

Individuals who hear a prophet may choose to believe or disbelieve, but in this case God Almighty makes “an offer that you can't refuse,” so, as far as Judaism is concerned, everyone of the Children of Israel has to struggle for all generations to come, with living up to the covenant their ancestors chose to enter into at Mount Sinai.

This concept, of a chosen (by being pressed into becoming a) choosing people,can and among many ultra orthodox Jews has, lead to exaggerated and self-righteous feelings of pride.

When the Qur'an (7:171) mentions this same event a second time, when the Mount was moved above the Children of Israel, this verse is followed by a reminder in 7:172 that “children of Adam” were all made (to) bear witness against their own souls: “‘Am I not your Lord?’ They said ‘Yes, we do bear witness.” God Almighty made a covenant with all individuals “lest [they] should say on the Day of Resurrection, ‘We were indeed unaware of this'”.

Thus, while loyalty to the commitment one's ancestors made at Mount Sinai may inspire greater effort for Jews in following God's will, when Jews, like Muslims, Christians and everyone else on earth; face judgement on the Day of Resurrection, we are all judged as individuals. As Prophet Abraham says: "Do not forsake me on the Day of Resurrection, a day where neither money nor children will benefit except whoever meets Allah with a sound heart" (26:87-89).

This reminder by the Qur'an that no religious community should be self-righteous; is similar to that of prophet Amos who tells the Children of Israel, “Are you not like the Children of Ethiopia to me, O Children of Israel? says God. Did I not redeem Israel from Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir?” (Amos 9:7)

I myself see the Torah's description of the descendants of Prophets Abraham, Isaac and Jacob/Israel as destined to become the first chosen people, as a testimony about the significance of Prophet Abraham himself, who Islamic tradition asserts received a Sacred Scripture in Ramadan as the Qur'an states: ”Indeed, this is in the former scriptures; the scriptures of Abraham and Moses. (87:19) and “Or has he not been informed of what was in the scriptures of Moses and Abraham (53:36)

For very many centuries Abraham's faithful descendants within the Children of Israel were the only monotheistic community that survived. Jews could have credited this situation to their own spiritual qualities. But the Torah teaches Jews not to be proud of themselves for being the first monotheistic community to survive long after their messenger was gone; because it was God's choice to choose them.

Their only choice was to always be conscious of, and obligated by, God's choice; to remain loyal to their ancestors pledge at Mount Sinai: “We will do.” In every generation a party failed and another party remained loyal. Thus it will be for all Jews and for all other religious communities until Judgement Day.

The lesson of both Ramadan and Shavuot is that while we should always treasure and be proud of our sacred heritage: “Whoever does not give up forged speech and evil actions (during Ramadan), Allah is not in need of his leaving his food and drink (i.e. Allah will not accept his fasting.)” (Bukhari, Volume 3, Book 31, Number 127).