In the midst of the boisterous commotion of life, and people running after their long and short-term goals, are people who free themselves and travel to answer the Call of God. “And proclaim to mankind (the duty of) Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca); they shall come to you on foot and on every lean camel, coming from every remote path.” (Qur’an 22: 27)

Having left behind worldly concerns, the busy multitude of pilgrims flow on to their destination with unceasing voices, mindful of nothing except declaring their undivided faithfulness to God Whose House they come to visit, ceaselessly chanting Talbiyah (devotional response to God’s Call to perform Hajj): “Here I am at Your service O God, here I am. Here I am at Your service. You have no partner, here I am. Yours alone is all praise and all bounty, and Yours alone is the sovereignty. You have no partner.”

An uncultivable valley in the hot desert of Mecca, surrounded by rows of rocky mountain ranges, was the location in which, after the floods, God subsequently ordered Abraham and his son Ishmael (peace be upon them) to rebuild and purify it. “Do not associate anything with Me and purify My House for those who circumambulate it, and those who stand in prayer, and those who bow and prostrate.” (Qur’an 22: 26) Tawaf (circumambulating) the first House of worship of God alone, Muslims thus glorify every part of it and feel connected to the birthplace of Islam and its long chain of Prophets from Adam to Muhammad (peace be upon them). “Indeed, the first House (of worship) established for mankind was that at Mecca, full of blessing, and a guidance for all beings.” (Qur’an 3: 96) It is the direction toward which Muslims around the world turn in their five daily obligatory prayers. “From wherever you go out (for prayer), turn your face toward the Sacred Mosque.” (Qur’an 2: 150)

Performing Hajj, with the ceremonies it entails, constitutes the fifth pillar of Islam, which God enjoins once in a lifetime on every sane adult Muslim who is physically and financially able. It is the ritual of Islam most representative of unity: one God, one direction (Qiblah – Ka`bah – the direction faced in prayer), one mode of dress, one cry, and the awesome assembly on the Day of ‘Arafah (9th of Dhul-Hijjah). The purpose of the journey is both emotional and mental growth. People do not live by theoretical concepts alone. They are powerfully influenced by their feelings. Islam strives to transform faith from thoughts in the mind to feelings that overflow from the heart and direct the body.

The different ceremonies of Hajj powerfully develop the emotions of Muslims toward their God and religion, their past and present, as different nationalities from all over the world gather on a single patch of land. Their modest, unadorned appearance eliminates any difference between a

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**Pilgrimage to Mecca**

*Here I am at Your service O God, here I am*

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king and a peasant, or between one race and another, and is a reminder of the only valid measure of superiority among people which Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) declared during the Farewell Hajj, “O people, verify your Lord is One and your father is one (i.e. Adam). Behold, there is no superiority of the Arab over the non-Arab, or of the non-Arab over the Arab, or of the red over the black, or of the black over the red – except by piety. Have I informed you?” (Musnad Ahmad)

Pilgrims put the world behind them, with just a seamless piece of cloth covering their body, like the shroud we shall be wrapped in when exiting this world. The life of this world is a back and forth journey to God. This is strongly reflected in Hajj, which starts with Ihram. This is the ritual state of practicing great self-denial in which a Muslim must enter before performing Hajj. During this state certain physical actions are forbidden, such as having marital relations, applying perfume, shaving the hair, clipping the nails, hunting, and cutting down trees. Any behavioral offense can jeopardize the integrity of Ihram. In this ritual state the dress of male pilgrims consists of two lengths of white cotton, one wrapped around the loins, and the other thrown over the left shoulder. Ihram clothes for women should be loose-fitting and fully cover the body except the face and hands.

During Hajj, the futile patterns of life are replaced with fervent Salaah (prayer), Sa’y (going between As-Safa and Al-Marwah hills during Hajj), the rituals are designed not only to be performed, but lived out. During Sa’y (going between As-Safa and Al-Marwah hills during Hajj), the pilgrims live through the parable of Hajar and her son Ishmael in which Abraham left them in this place devoid of any means of survival. As Abraham turned to depart, Hajar held the reins of his mount and asked, “To whom are you leaving us?” Abraham did not answer. Hajar asked, “God ordered you to do so?” He nodded affirmatively. She said, “Then He will never leave us be lost.” She stoutly submitted to the Decree of God, and her trial of faith started; her baby became very thirsty. She knew she must look for a spring, a well, or a caravan that had water. She climbed As-Safa hill to get a better view of her surroundings. Finding nothing, she hurried to Al-Marwah hill but found not a trace of life. She returned again to As-Safa hill then back to Al-Marwah. She ran between the two hills seven times, until she could run no more, but found nothing. Exhausted, she sat beside her crying infant. While writhing with thirst, her little infant’s leg hit the ground and water gushed forth abundantly. It became the well-known Zamzam Well whose blessed water continues to flow today.

Every pilgrim returns home with this principle settled in their heart. The earthly means end, do not despair, keep on trying, God will never abandon you, as happened with Hajar and her infant son Ishmael. It helps a believer cope with all the hardships of life firmly and hopefully. “It is not He Who responds to the distressed one, when he calls on Him, and Who removes the evil!” (Qur’an 27: 62)

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Soon after sunset on the Day of ‘Arafah, throngs of pilgrims, glorifying and praising God, leave for Muzdalifah to collect pebbles to throw at Jamarat (stone pillars marking three pebble-throwing areas) in Mina. This is a reenactment of Prophet Abraham’s firm stand against the whispers of Satan, who strove to impede him from fulfilling a vision he had of sacrificing his son Ishmael in obedience to God. Certain situations in life may force us to make a choice between God and something else. Whichever God or Ishmael did – choose God.

Walking with resolute steps, Satan appeared to hinder him three times on his path. Abraham refused to yield to his temptations.

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