

Abraham's devotion to God inspires Muslims, Christians and Jews

By Asma Mobin-Uddin

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In the current climate, I hesitate to tell people that the biggest holiday of the Muslim year celebrates the Prophet Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son at God's command. I worry that people will associate the observance with the political situations we are seeing and will miss the profound beauty and strength of the story. Told in both the Bible and the Qur'an, the episode is revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, who all honor Abraham's example, righteousness, and faith.

God tested Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice his only son. Out of devotion and obedience, Abraham was willing to do so. Before the deed could take place, a ram was substituted for sacrifice instead of the boy. The lesson in this great trial of Abraham's is that people should love and be faithful to God above everything else in their lives.

Some are uncomfortable with this story because of the reference to child sacrifice. Others spend time arguing over which son it was. Both miss the point. Of course God does not want us to kill our children. Both the Bible and the Qur'an are clear that the purpose of the event was to test Abraham's devotion to God, not to condone a human sacrifice. And which son it was is irrelevant.

The prophets throughout the ages have taught this same message of faithfulness as the most important imperative in worshipping God. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might," Moses urged his followers (Deuteronomy 6:5). Jesus reaffirmed the same message, saying, "This is the first and greatest commandment" (Matthew 22:37-38). A prayer from the Qur'an reads, "Truly my prayer, my sacrifice, my living, and my dying are all for God, the Cherisher of the worlds" (Qur'an 6:162). The Prophet Muhammad taught that the most important belief in Islam is that nothing is worthy of worship, nothing is deserving of one's complete love, devotion, and obedience, except for God.

Whatever we love of the gifts God has given us, these gifts should not be more important to us than their source. If they are, then we have strayed. And many such "idols" compete for our time and attention. Our devotion to pursuing material wants, riches, fame, desires, or even leisure activities can border on worship. But Abraham's example reminds us what should be most important in our lives.

During the Hajj pilgrimage and the Eid al-Adha holiday, Muslims commemorate the history of the Prophet Abraham and his family. This year, these events take place during the last week of December.

Pilgrims in Mecca retrace Abraham's footsteps and rededicate themselves to following his example. As part of the Eid celebrations, Muslims have a sheep, camel, or goat slaughtered, share part of the meat with family and friends in holiday meals, and donate at least one third of the meat to the poor. The symbolism of the sacrifice commemorates the trial of Abraham.

Devotion to God is the purpose of the sacrifice, not the actual meat or animal killed. Sharing holiday meals strengthens ties of family and friends, and donating the meat helps remind Muslims of their responsibilities to people in need. Food banks in America have reported an increase in fresh meat donations as Muslims donate to the poor the meat from this commemoration.

Muslims return from the Hajj with a renewed closeness and commitment to God. They recommit to loving and serving God above all else, with all their hearts, souls, and minds, because nothing else is worthy of this devotion.

The opportunities for reflection and rededication to one's priorities are part of the many holidays celebrated this season. As we choose our paths, we have a tremendous example in the firm and sure footsteps of the great Prophet Abraham, the true in faith, the friend of God.

Dr. Asma Mobin-Uddin is a pediatrician and president of the Council on American-Islamic Relations' Ohio Chapter. Her upcoming children's book, The Best Eid Holiday Ever, is due to be published in the fall of 2007 and is about the Eid al-Adha holiday.