

God's mercy is reflected in a mother's love

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My newborn son lies nestled against my shoulder. I hear and feel his soft, gentle breaths as he sleeps, oblivious to the rest of the world. Warm, dry, fed and snuggled in the gentle cocoon of my arms, he rests peacefully. As I gaze at him, I am overwhelmed by feelings of love, tenderness and mercy for him.

As a pediatrician, I have always felt personally affected by my patients and their families. After I had children of my own, however, my heart awoke to a whole new awareness of what mercy meant.

As a mother, I feel an even greater empathy for the suffering of others, especially children. I see my own child's eyes in the haunted gaze of the burned Iraqi boy without arms lying in his hospital bed and in the sad, bewildered face of the young son of an American soldier at his father's funeral.

A mother's love and compassion for her child is one of the strongest, purest forms of mercy we experience. Islamic teachings build on this experience to help us understand the love and mercy of God.

Prophet Muhammad once pointed out a mother caring for her child and asked his companions if they could imagine her ever throwing the child into a fire. After they emphatically said they could not, he taught them that God has more love and mercy for his servants than that mother has for her child.

The Arabic word for womb, "rahim," is derived from "rahma," which means mercy, love, compassion, and kindness. From the same root comes one of God's titles: Rahman, the all-Merciful, possessor of all-embracing, perfect mercy and compassion. The word describing a mother's tenderness and love for her offspring is used in its superlative form to describe the mercy of God.

The Quran begins with God defining his relationship with human beings by calling himself Rahman and Raheem. Raheem, the Mercy-giving, refers to God's generous and unbounded bestowal of mercy. These terms are used hundreds of times in the Quran, reminding Muslims that belief in God's infinite mercy and love for his creation is central to Islam.

Human beings have availed themselves of this mercy since the first sin of their primal parents, Adam and Eve. According to the Quran, after Adam and Eve disobeyed God by tasting from the tree in the garden, they were full of remorse and sought God's mercy and forgiveness. He accepted their repentance and forgave them.

God offers the same tenderness and benevolence to all of humanity. Through Prophet Muhammad, God said: "O child of Adam, so long as you call upon me and put your hope in me, I will forgive you for what you have done and I shall not mind. . . ."

According to Islam, people do not inherit sin, and human nature is not inherently evil. However, people are weak and forgetful, and therefore they sin. Islamic teachings exhort people who have sinned to mend their ways and turn back to God, whose mercy embraces all things and surpasses his wrath. The Quran also stresses that one should not despair of the mercy of God, because God forgives all sins and is truly the Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful (Surah 39:53).

Islamic tradition teaches that God divided the attribute of mercy into 100 parts and reserved 99 of them for himself. The last part he divided among all of his creation. Because of that one single part, God's creatures are merciful to each other, so that even the mare lifts up her hooves away from her foal lest she trample it.

I try to imagine the collective mercy in the hearts of all the mothers, all over the world, from every species, who ever have lived or will live. This is beyond my comprehension. I feel overwhelmed just by my own love and tenderness for my children.

I think about my newborn son again, sleeping close to my heart. I will find it scary to send him out into the world to encounter those whose emotions are not tempered by mercy for him. As I pull him closer to me, I realize that no one in the world has more mercy for this baby than I do. No one loves him more than his father and I do. No one can protect him better than we can. No one wants better for him than we do. No one, that is, except for God.

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