**Isira & Noha’s First Fast**

As a girl growing up in a Muslim home Ramadan was a much anticipated event, the house always seemed fuller in the few weeks that preceded its start. In the early years of life I of course could not participate in what Ramadan was all about, fasting; this part of my faith was slightly too rigorous, but of course I grew and eventually the year I turned eleven I assumed one of the greatest feats I had ever experienced yet also the most rewarding one.

Fasting, of course, is the act of refraining from food and drink from sunrise to sunset; however this piece of Ramadan is only a part of the entire idea. During Ramadan a Muslim makes the attempt to be a better version of themselves; giving charity, helping others, and being kind are only a few examples of the things that one should attempt to do before the month is up. While doing good is a very large part of the month, attempting to get closer to Allah is also particularly important; increased prayer (salat) is how this closeness is obtained. Family is also rather important during Ramadan, especially as we gather around our breakfast (Iftar) at sunset.

My first Ramadan is particularly memorable, I was both really excited and somewhat nervous. Lucky for me Ramadan that year was taking place during summer vacation, meaning that I would not have to fast during school making the entire imminent feat easier. As the month started I grew used to fasting and assumed a comfortable rhythm that made fasting normal; but that, as I mentioned previously is not the entirety of the festivities, helping others and bringing oneself closer to Allah were both things that I struggled with throughout the month, yet as the month progressed these things too became engraved into my being. I woke up every morning, early enough that I could join my family in prayer and then afterwards we would all sit together as a family laughing and joking, getting to know eachother better; then afterwards my mother would cook a hot meal and we would all take it to the mosque as an offering to those that did not have the means to cook a meal for the much anticipated breaking of the fast at sunset. The joy that I received from being able to provide for people that could not provide for themselves was like no other and allowed for me to understand the true meaning of Ramadan and why it was so important to the Islamic faith. In my first year as an official participant of Ramadan, I understood the true significance of fasting, I understood what it felt like to not have food which in turn made me understand the importance of helping others. This realization made not eating for a day easier as I grew to see my petty complaints of hunger as nothing compared to the hunger that half the world feels everyday. At the beginning of the month going to the supermarket had seemed more difficult than climbing Everest, but the piles of food by the end of the month ceased to bother me and even my watering mouth had been quelled. In all, my realization helped me become more grateful for what I have which in turn made me closer to my creator. However, prayer did not only bring me closer to Allah it also brought me closer to my family and helped me become infinitely grateful for them as well. I began to help my mother in the kitchen, aiding her in both the preparation of our food and that of the mosque visitors; all the while I came to understand my mother as a person, I learned stories of her past that I had never realized were carried within her history. I sat with my father awaiting Iftar, and I began to understand him and his past as well; I became appreciative of all that he does for our family as a whole as well as what he does for the community.

During Iftar the food my mother and I had cooked throughout the day lay splayed out over the table carrying with it the loveliest of aromas. However, what brought me the most joy was the happiness in the eyes of my parents as well as in the smiles of my siblings. I could feel us as a family growing closer; helping me understand what Ramadan truly meant, and it helped me come to truly love that month in a way that was unimaginable to me before then. My first Ramadan went a little like this:

*Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick.*  My eyes followed the second hand as it made its third rotation on its axis around the clock. I sighed as my stomach growled again, and willed the hand to move faster. However, it only seemed to slow down. *Avoid thinking about food. Go pray, read the Quran, or do something else. And DON’T watch the clock. Keep yourself busy and the time will pass before you even realize it.* I tore my eyes from the clock as my dad’s advice resurfaced in my mind. Eight hours into my first full day of one of the most important parts of my faith, and I was already craving the mint chocolate chip ice cream that my mom had bought three days prior.

As a younger child, I had earnestly awaited the day I would be old enough to fast the month of Ramadan with my parents and older sister. I would then be able to wake up with them at four during the night to eat Suhoor (the early morning meal eaten before sunrise to sustain the body throughout the day).The week before Ramadan was always busy, and the house was always in a buzz as my parents hastened to make preparations for the once-in-a-year event. My mother ran around to Middle Eastern stores to gather some of the traditional foods that we eat for Iftar (the breaking of the fast at sunset) such as broth, various fruits and salads, Qamar al-Deen (a thick drink made from dried apricot paste), and probably most important of all, dates. My father usually accompanied her and bought new Qurans and prayer mats.

My phone erupted into the azan (the call to prayer) and I got up to go pray salat al-’asr. I performed the necessary ablutions before prayer, and the water soothed my sweltering face. I could smell the dinner my mom had cooked for my younger siblings, and I made a face as I walked past the dining room. I could hear my dad reading aloud from the Quran to my mom, and I went and to join them. The AC was up ridiculously high, but I still picked up a flappy book to fan myself as I sat next to my dad. I made several trips to the bathroom to splash my face with cold water. Soon, it was time to start preparing Iftar. My mom went to prepare the broth, bread filled with cheese, and chickpeas. My older sister was put in charge of the juices. My dad cut up a watermelon and a cantaloupe, and brought in a bigger table and more chairs from the garage to accommodate our guests. I set the table, my eyes constantly flitting to the clock. I finished just as the doorbell rang, signaling the arrival of our guests. They all filed in, bearing platters of couscous and stuffed vegetables. We sat in the living room to chat until it was time for Iftar.

The azan sounded off from numerous phones, and I had never heard a sound more beautiful in my life. We all quickly washed our hands, and broke the fast with a date and a glass of water. We then prayed salat al-Maghrib and sat down to devour the food on the dining room table. I had been warned not to eat too much too quickly, as it would upset my empty stomach, but that was the last thing on my mind as I savoured the food that I would never again take for granted.

As the days of Ramadan passed, fasting got easier. Ramadan is not only one of the five pillars of Islam, it is also an important spiritual journey. It’s a time to better oneself, to perform good deeds, and to strengthen one’s connection to Allah. Through the hunger and thirst of fasting, I was reminded of the starvation that many in this world are forced to go through on a daily basis. Through the increased prayer and worship, I felt more connected to Allah, and strived to be better. As I broke the fast on the last day of Ramadan, I couldn’t help but feel an overwhelming sense of accomplishment, content, and peace within myself. I also felt extremely excited because the next day was going to be Eid al-Fitr, a day of gifts, sweets, and celebration.

**Source:** Co-written by Noha Algahimi and Isira Dirar, sophomore students in Lincoln Public Schools, December 2015.