

The Prophet's Emigration: Its Significance Today

GULF NEWS: Monday, June 21, 1993

Historical background:

It was a hot day in the summer of 622 A.D. when two refugees escaping their pursuers sought shelter in a small cave on the mountain of Thawr. They had taken the southward trail that led to Yemen, though their destination lay to the north of Mecca: Yathrib. The oasis of peace they had long been seeking was beckoning them onward! Muhammad Bin Abdillah (peace upon him), and his closest friend, Abu Bakr had escaped unnoticed just before dawn, for Prophet Muhammad had discovered that the pagan Meccans were plotting to kill him rather than allow him to emigrate to Yathrib. The elders of Quraish had been opposing the monotheistic faith he brought with ferocity for the past 13 years, and had striven to keep the converts in check by all possible means. Although some of these converts were killed and others tortured, the Meccans gained nothing at all, whereas the followers of Prophet only increased in number and vigor. Most were young, unshackled by tradition and yet unattached to custom, and being so, could clearly see through the bigotry of their elders.

The Prophet too suffered great loss in 619 A.D. when his only wife of 25 years and his supportive uncle both died as a result of the three-year famine that the Meccans had imposed, upon the "renegades". He had cherished Khadija, his confidante and ally, and their four daughters, dedicating his youth to the care of his family, and at age 40 when he received the Divine Command, he dedicated himself to the service of his Lord. Prophet Muhammad (peace upon him) had to spread God's Message, lay the groundwork for its successful adaptation, and provide a healthy environment for its progress. He proceeded to do so, trying not to instigate hostility, all the while adamant that the worship of the One True God cannot be compromised.

Notwithstanding, the message caused a revolution within the Meccan ranks. Islam was indeed an all-encompassing transformation that covered all aspects of life: the personal, economic, socio-politic, and intellectual. The Meccan elders, disinclined to change, stood fast to the traditions embedded in their history; as custodians of the Ka'ba they were the richest and most influential of idolatrous Arab

tribes. They couldn't allow the new religion to spread, and Mecca, to the Prophet, became a quagmire. Hence, he looked abroad for a firm foundation whereupon he could establish the new faith. He was discouraged from travel by an unsuccessful trip he made to Ta'if, and resorted to speaking to visitors from neighboring towns during the seasonal gatherings. Inviting them to the new faith, he recited verses of the Holy Qur'an and showed them that worship is owed to the One God, Creator and Sustainer of all existence.

Twelve Yathribites on pilgrimage to the Ka'ba (then surrounded by idols) listened to him and secretly pledged their faith in 621 A.D., and he sent someone back with them for further teaching and enlightenment. During pilgrimage the following year, a representative party of 75 Yathribites, including two women, not only professed their faith, but invited the Prophet to their town, taking an oath to defend him as they would their own kin. That is how Yathrib became "Al Medina" and would henceforth be referred to as 'The City of Prophet'.

The Prophet's Emigration, or '*Hijra*', is what Muslims chose to represent as the beginning of their Lunar Calendar and the traditional starting point of Islamic history. The *Anno Hegirae*, or Era of *Hijra*, begins on the first day (1st Muharram) of the Arabic year in which the *Hijra* took place, that is, July 16, 622, not the day when the Prophet actually arrived at Yathrib which was 12 Rabi'ul-Awwal, or September 24.

With the emigration of Prophet Muhammad (peace upon him) and his followers, begins one of history's greatest expeditions in pursuit of truth and defense of faith. "Muhammad initiated religious, social and cultural developments of monumental significance in the history of mankind," notes the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (15th, edition, Macropedia). "He created a federation of Arab tribes, which, in less than 20 years after his death defeated the Byzantine and Persian empires, occupied a vast territory from Libya to Persia, and then developed into the Arab, or Islamic Empire. In 13 centuries, Islam has produced great saints, and there has been a high level of religious devotion and moral performance among ordinary Muslims".

Why Arabs?

A valid question might be raised here: Why was the Qur'an revealed to an Arab Messenger, with the responsibility of spreading its divine Message given to the Arabs? In answering the question we first have to recognize that the Arabs of the Peninsula were among the few free peoples of their time. The Arabian peninsula had never been conquered or occupied by foreign forces, and its people had never been oppressed or enslaved. Having had no advanced political system, they still lived the free life of the nomad, overseeing their lands, crops and cattle. They were governed to some extent by a tribal system that undertook trade with neighboring countries (parts of the Persian and Roman empires), but were not influenced by them. The Arabs despised the elaborate palaces, buildings and monuments they encountered, since, built by slaves and forced labor, these were the manifestations of a population under bondage and autocratic rule. The Ka'ba itself was a testimony to that, its simple cubic structure holding much reverence. Before Prophet Muhammad's birth, when King Abraha, ruler of Yemen (570 A.D.) built the ornate, gilded church of "Qullays" announcing his intention of diverting Arabian pilgrimage and trade thereto, an idolatrous Arab from the tribe of Kinanah traveled there -action speaking louder than words- and defecated on its grounds as a sign of contempt.

The spreading of a new faith requires people who are able to withstand suffering, who are physically and psychologically equipped to a fight, and possess the qualities of leadership. These qualities can only belong to those who are free. An example could be drawn from the story of Prophet Moses (peace upon him) with his people. He faced a predicament when he tried to lead his followers - who had been enslaved for more than four centuries- out of Egypt and into battle. They initially hesitated to emigrate, and later bluntly refused to fight. Both the Holy Qur'an and the Old Testament bear witness to this:

'They said: "O Moses!

Never shall we enter it (the Holy Land)

For as long as they (the powerful people) remain there!

Go yourself and your Lord then fight together,

While we, right here, shall stay. "

HQ: 5:24)

'And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron:.. And wherefore hath the Lord brought us unto this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should be a prey? Were it not better for us to return to Egypt'?

(Old Testament: Numbers 13:1-2)

Although Moses was one of the children of Israel, unlike his people, he had been raised free, living in Pharaoh's palace. Freedom, and all that comes with it, had prepared him for leadership.

Secondly, the Arabs placed high value on uninhibited self-expression, which, as a fundamental epitome of freedom, is evident in the remarkable Arabian poetry of the time. There were no restrictions to the free word, and seasonal meetings would be held for the recitation of poetry and the exchange of stories, tales, opinions and news. So important were those meetings that warring tribes would temporarily lay down their arms as they met for the occasion! Thirdly, added to their freedom and qualities of leadership were the traditional Arabian virtues such as honesty, integrity, generosity, hospitality, bravery, forbearance, and forgiveness. These qualities were essential from the very beginning: the Meccans 'tolerated' the presence of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) for 13 years, while the Yathribites immediately adopted the strangers into their midst. Later on, these characteristics would be extremely constructive as the nation built itself. Thus the unique independent Arabs of the Peninsula were the most qualified to be the bearer of God's final Message to the world.

Laying Foundations:

Upon emigrating to Medina, Prophet Muhammad (peace upon him) immediately undertook constructive measures towards the building of a state. A mosque was built, a pledge of brotherhood was proclaimed amongst the believers, and a document was drawn up between all concerned parties: a confederation between the Arabs of Medina and the Emigrants, as well as an agreement between the Muslims and the Jews who lived there. A version of the document (c. 627 AD) has been preserved and is known as the Constitution of Medina. The mosque was open to everyone regardless of age, gender, color or creed, all congregating and worshipping together. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) had founded a state and had laid the basis for a universal religion. The Mecca that drove him out opened its doors to him in January, 630 A.D., as he entered leading 10,000 men. With his chin brushing against

the neck of his mount, the Prophet rode into his hometown in humbleness, grateful to God for the realization of what had seemed a dream. But he did not forsake Medina, returning there to live and die with the people who had supported him in the time of need. Together with them his work bore fruit.

Then and Now:

The small community created by his Emigration, *Hijra*, brought forth the high level of religious devotion, moral standards, dedication, knowledge and advancement that led to the progress of mankind. The progress of the Arab people however, slowing down with internal strife, came to an abrupt halt with the loss of freedom brought on by rulers' oppression or foreign occupation.

It is important for the Arabs and the Muslims to commemorate the *Hijra* and what it signifies, now, more than ever. One thousand three hundred and seventy-one years after the *Hijra* we find much of our land occupied, many of our people in bondage, many dying or fleeing in terror. We have lost the freedom necessary for progress and are unable to strengthen ourselves by any lasting form of brotherhood. Our source of guidance, the Holy Qur'an, is not approached with the awareness it deserves. Friday sermons which should be of benefit to all, are delivered in Arabic alone which not all Muslims understand. Moreover, women are not welcomed in many mosques, are excluded from many religious gatherings, and are discouraged from many everyday activities, often under the pretext of religion. It is time we changed all that.

It is time for us to differentiate between the unsound restrictions of tradition and the wholesome requirements of religion. Faith, though wonderful, is not conducive to victory on its own. It should entail, amongst other requirements, faith in ourselves and in each other. It is time to approach our future with true hope, and stop looking back to our past with false pride. If we do look back, it should be for lessons to learn and experiences to gain, not to bask in splendor that is not our own. Whatever glory, planted in the past, has already been harvested by past generations. We must plant our own. It is time.

What we need, each and every one of us, is to perform a *Hijra* out of the quagmire that is our present, in all its ignorance, intolerance, restraint, confusion and bloodshed, reaching inward to evoke

our potential, reaching out to reclaim one another in true brotherhood -disregarding oneself for a change-
pursuing the general welfare of all mankind.

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