

MOON SIGHTING FOR THE MONTH OF RAMADAN

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One only has to say Ramadan and you envisage many things. The first of them moonsighting, and then the altercations, and the incessant squabbling that resound in the masajid and the communities throughout the beginning and the end of the month of Ramadan.

In the issue of moonsighting there are two roles. The first role is that of the eminent scholars who have always been the well-wishers of the ummah. They aspired to take out confrontation and sectarianism from the concept of moonsighting. They make efforts every year to bring this matter to a consensus and to unify the communities and masajid on one decision. We have seen, though, that their efforts have fallen on deaf ears with little to no difference on the outcome of each coming Ramadan.

The second role is played by those who put aside intellect and judge matters based on their emotions. The result: they remain stubborn on their personal opinion though it may clearly contradict the Qur'an and Sunnah. People are forced to follow their opinion to the extent that one who disagrees with it becomes a social pariah. There is no accountability if these emotional people backbite him, falsely accuse him, or swear at him as if it is permissible. Sometimes it goes to the extent of physically abuse for his difference of opinion and worse, the one who beat him actually thinks he is performing a good deed.

In essence, a purely juristical Islamic issue becomes the playground of a few people who try to solve and settle it with emotions and fieriness. It is relegated from an Islamic issue to a personal one. Differing with an opinion translates to an attack on the individual who holds that opinion. The result of this is self-evident. A day of one of the most sacred worships in Islam and two days of celebration of the ummah are transformed (by Shaytan) into three days of disunity and chaos.

This is why it is important to analyze this issue of moonsighting through the Qur'an and Sunnah. That way, every Muslim can establish his position according to the Qur'an and Sunnah and likewise know the position of others based on the evidences used to support their position. Following are a few points that are discussed that will help us reflect on this issue and will alleviate, if not eliminate, the schisms and simmering tensions between both parties and most importantly, help us open our minds to the opinions of others. And this is not difficult for Allah .

1. Astronomical Calculations

Determining the beginning and the end of a new month through astronomical calculations is unfounded in the Qur'an and Sunnah. The standard in the *shari'ah* for discerning the beginning of a new month and the end of the last month is based on actual moonsighting.

Which means that if the moon is not sighted, the month will be completed with thirty days. In the ahadith, the Blessed Prophet ﷺ incessantly put emphasis on this:

لَا تَصُومُوا حَتَّى تَرَوْا الْهَيْلَالَ ، وَلَا تُفْطِرُوا حَتَّى تَرَوْهُ.

Do not fast unless you see the moon, do not break your fast until you see the moon.
(Bukhari H.1773, Muslim H.1795, Nasai H.2093, Abu-Dawood H.1976, Muatta Malik H.557)

Meaning that if you do not see the moon, then do not begin the month of Ramadan and likewise, do not celebrate the Eid until you sight the moon. In another hadith the Blessed Prophet ﷺ clearly prohibited the use of calculations. He said:

عَنْ ابْنِ عُمَرَ - رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمَا - عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ « إِنَّا أُمَّةٌ أُمِّيَّةٌ لَا نَكْتُبُ وَلَا نَحْسِبُ الشَّهْرَ هَكَذَا وَهَكَذَا وَهَكَذَا - وَعَقَدَ الْإِصْبَامَ فِي الثَّلَاثَةِ - وَالشَّهْرُ هَكَذَا وَهَكَذَا وَهَكَذَا.

We are an illiterate nation. We do not write or calculate months. He said it is like this, this, or this. So saying, the Blessed Prophet ﷺ lifted his hands three times with all fingers spread the first two times and the thumb hidden the third time to indicate 29 days. Then he said the month is like this, this, and this and again lifted his hands three times, this time all fingers spread out each time to indicate 30 days. (Muslim H.1806, Bukhari H.1780, Nasai H.2111, Abu-Dawood H.1975)

In this hadith, The Blessed Prophet ﷺ certainly doesn't mean to say that this is an ummah of illiterates, but rather he is emphasising their simplicity of not being educated in the subject which we are discussing. The purpose behind this is to declare that we do not know calculations nor are we going to use this method to figure our months. This is a universal religion. Anyone from anywhere can follow it wherever he may be. If the system was based on calculations, the decision of millions of people would be in the hands of the few who would decide when the month begins and when it ends. Instead, Islam based the lunar calendar on moonsighting so that even bedouins, who are out of touch with most modern sciences and technologies, could sight the moon and know when the month begins and ends.

This may raise a question in the mind of many that if Islam is all about simplicity, then why do we use time tables for salah and depend on the calculations which produce those time tables. This is an important question because the answer to it will prove how Islam is indeed a universal religion and will also reveal the most fascinating miracle of the Blessed Prophet ﷺ. To understand this we need to remember that **in Islam, the beginning and end of the month rely on the sighting of the moon while the salah timings are based on the movement of the sun.**

Calculations to this day have not been able to inform us of when the moon can first be

sighted; the only thing known to us from the calculations is when the moon is born. And we as humans cannot see the moon immediately after its birth. How many hours does it take before the moon can be seen? Sometimes it can be seen after 14 hours and at other times it cannot be sighted even after 20 hours. This is because there are many different factors which contribute to the sighting of the moon.

The sun is different. During the day, the sun is very easily seen every day except for when the skies are overcast. This is one difference between the sun and moon. Another big difference between the two is that the sun runs on a set path that is the same each and every year. For example, if one measures the time of the rising and setting of the sun on the first of January, 2005 he will find that is no different from the time of the rising and setting of the sun on the same date, one year before or after. And if one measures the time of the rising and setting of the sun on the same date ten years later it will still be no different from the time the sun rose and set on January 1, 2005. So if one person notes the movement of the sun one whole year and makes a time table out of his observations he could continue using that time table for the rest of his life. And in reality this is exactly how the time table for the salawat was made. Once this time table was produced, there was no need to repeat the process of observing of the sun.

The moon in this aspect is a very different case. If Ramadan was 30 days this year, it won't necessarily be 30 days the next year or the year after that. And this highlights the miracle of the Blessed Prophet ﷺ that he prohibited the use of calculations and formulas to determine the birth of the moon (**nor do we write nor do we make calculations**), but didn't include under this order the movement of the sun. How was the Blessed Prophet ﷺ to know 1,400 years ago of the consistency that was in the movement of the sun and that, despite the latest breakthroughs in astronomical data and calculations, no one would ever be able to read the exact time of the sighting of the new moon.

In summary, it is not possible nor has the *Shari'ah* allowed the Islamic lunar calendar to be based on calculations. This has never been permitted and has been the consensus of the Ummah. Though, this much can be said that Islam does allow using astronomical calculations to aid in moonsighting. For example, it can be helpful in providing us the approximate timings to when the moon will be most likely visible, or the age of the moon at the time of the setting of the sun, or at what time the moon will set.