



OCTOBER FAITH COLUMN

Sharing Eid

Muslims do not have a formal arrangement for communal eating, although it is considered to be an important aspect of religious practice (like the admirable institution of the *langar*) but during the month of Ramadhan there is an emphasis on inviting people to share the daily breaking of the fast in homes, mosques and restaurants. These gatherings are often inappropriately described as feasts, which obscures both their simplicity and their purpose of ensuring that no one remains hungry or lonely after fasting all day. The austerities of fasting and the pleasure of sharing meals culminate with the day of Eid, which is a time for celebration and distributing a portion of the good things that we have earned. The head of each household must provide the means to feed one poor person for each family member or guest under his roof on the night before Eid.

We all spend most of our lives earning a living and are often too busy to appreciate how fortunate we are, how much we really have. Twice a year Muslims take time to reflect on this: during the fast in the month of Ramadhan, and then two months later in the pilgrimage season. These are times when they deny themselves luxuries and comfort, dedicating themselves to prayer.

People around us will always do something that we disagree with or find strange, but there are special times when differences are a lot less important than what we can share. Times to put on new clothes, greet friends, family and neighbours. Times to give a little of what has been saved to a favourite charity and have a good time. These are celebrations of repairing relationships that the year has strained and building new links in festivals of grateful sharing.

However, giving and sharing are not limited just to the Eids or specific months or with those close to us. While Muslims own the wealth produced by their labour, they are given many reminders that this ownership is temporary and that the real owner of all things is God. Thus, while free to spend as they please, there is a moral pressure to give more than the obligatory payments of *zakat* and *khums*. Men and women must act as agents in the process of distributing the sustenance that God has provided for all mankind. Every day must contain elements of fasting, restraint from over-indulgence and, to be true to the commands of the Qur'an, the needs of neighbours and strangers must not be neglected. This means that Muslims should not be content to say that anyone is welcome to join our celebrations but look beyond the walls of their houses and mosques. Therefore, I invite readers of this brief article to share the happiness of our Eids, grasp the hand of friendship and mutual understanding offered to all during Islamic Awareness Week each November and also thank all those brothers and sisters who pray for mankind.

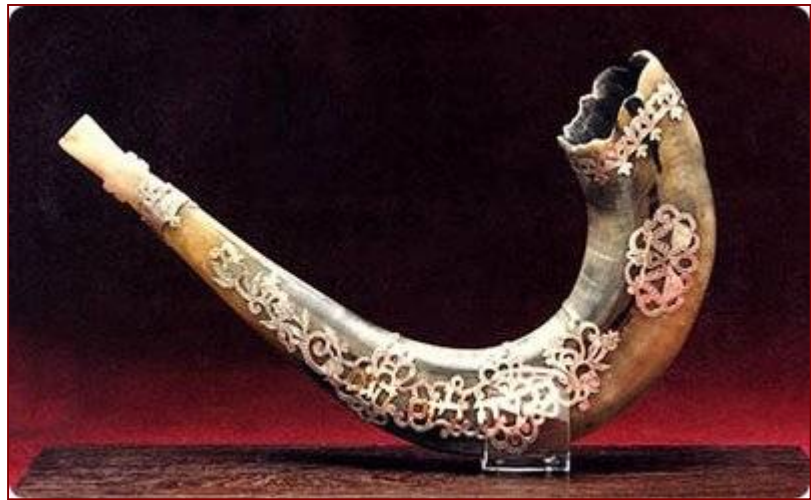
Sheik Muhammad Amin Evans is Chief Consulting Editor of the "Shia Affairs Journal"

Yom Kippur

For Jewish people the end of the summer and the onset of autumn brings the High Holy Days, known also as the Days of Awe and Judgement. The significance of the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement can be simply explained - we have the opportunity to start a new year with a clean slate providing we have done everything possible to acknowledge and try to put right wrongdoings done during the previous 12 months. This is a really serious business- beginning in earnest 4 weeks before the New Year known in Hebrew as *Rosh Hashana*, with personal self scrutiny to examine our bad deeds. We should then apologise to those people who we have wronged and try to put things right; then over a period of 10 days we approach the Almighty with our confession of the sins we have done to others, those we have done that others know nothing about and also sins committed that we ourselves may be unaware of.

During the two-day New Year festival, we eat apple and honey to symbolise our desire for a sweet and complete year to come. Our prayers are of repentance, asking for forgiveness in these two days and during the next eight, culminating in the Day of Atonement - *Yom Kippur*.

On this, the most holy day in the Jewish calendar, all Jews over the age of 12 (females) and 13 (males) are required to fast for 25 hours, taking no food or drink. We are told that angels do not eat food and so on this day, the day when the 10 commandments were received for the second



time, we aspire to be like angels in the fervent desire that our sins will be forgiven and we shall be inscribed in the Book of Life for the coming year. During this period of time, the rams horn, the *shofar*, is regularly blown at synagogue services, its distinct sound being a wake-up call to our souls, to be aware of what we are approaching and to remind us of what we must do. Hear it at http://www.beliefnet.com/story/42/story_4248_1.html

Repentance and forgiveness, prayer and the giving of charity, are the integral components of the High Holy Days, when most Jews, even those who rarely come to the synagogue, are drawn together in prayer, reinforcing their identity as one people for the benefit of the Jewish people and all humanity. May our world be blessed in the coming year with peace, health, justice and divine blessings. *Shana Tovah* - Happy New Year

Ruth Jacobs is a member of the Birmingham Jewish Community involved in interfaith work through the Birmingham Council of Faiths, the Council of Christians and Jews and other organisations.

The Rains Retreat

When the Buddha lived in India some 2,600 years ago, holy men used to wander the country, begging for food and giving teachings wherever they stayed. As the Buddha's reputation grew he attracted very large numbers to his monastic order. Soon local rulers and land owners began offering them accommodation where they could rest during the monsoon season. But since this was the growing season too, local farmers became anxious for their crops with so many monks tramping about in the vicinity. The Buddha therefore agreed to make it a rule to confine monks to the monastery during this three-month period. Instead they could give more time to study, instruction of juniors and meditation practice. This was how the 'Rains Retreat' (*Vassa*) was first instituted.

Not all monks were by any means saintly characters and there was sometimes trouble with so many cooped together for long periods. When the Buddha was passing the ninth monsoon after his Enlightenment at a monastery in Kosambi, a dispute arose over the emptying of a chamber pot. Soon the monks began taking sides and the Buddha was told to mind his own business when he tried to mediate. Feeling forced to leave the monastery but mindful of the rule he had made, he passed the rest of the season in a rough lean-to in the forest, ministered to by a sympathetic elephant and a monkey.

With lay supporters so busy with their own affairs at this time, not to mention their disinclination to go out into the rain more than they need, it can be imagined that the monks confined to their quarters often went short of food and other necessities. Another of their rules forbids them to obtain food other than as a gift or even to prepare uncooked food for themselves. As a reward for keeping the rule so strictly, therefore, the custom grew of giving the monks a treat at the end of the season and ministering to their other needs, particularly as regards their much patched monastic robes. But before this could happen, mindful of the quarrel at Kosambi and similar occasions, the monks had first to ask each other's forgiveness for any offence they had given during the retreat. In this way they could emerge with serenity and in concord, despite what may have happened behind closed doors.



The tradition still continues, even in lands where the seasons are different, and the monks go into retreat between the full moon days of July and October. Those from very busy monasteries in the East often come to spend 3 months in the West where they can escape from the mundane duties of their own monastery and really have time to devote to spiritual practice. Thus the summer months are times when we often have very eminent teachers staying in the West. The rains retreat is so important in a Buddhist monk's life that if you ask him how long he has been a monk he will tell you how many 'rainy seasons' have passed since his ordination.

Ann Lovelock is a member of the Birmingham Buddha Vihara Trust and Secretary of Birmingham Council of Faiths

The Baha'i Faith

Recognizing that the principles of the Baha'i Faith are not widely known to many people, I thought I might begin the Baha'i contributions to the column with a brief introduction to it and how it attracted me.

The Baha'i Faith is an independent world religion believing in the existence of one transcendent God, unknowable in essence and beyond physical description, and the general principles of the faith are unity, peace and advancement. In the words of Bahauallah, the Founder of the Faith:

"The time has come when the imperative necessity for the holding of a vast, all-embracing assemblage of men will be universally realised.....Blessed and happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the people and kindreds of the earth....It is not for him to pride himself that he loveth his country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world....The Earth is but one country and Mankind its citizens." In this age when the world is becoming a global village these words appealed to me greatly.

The faith was heralded in 1844 by the Bab, meaning the Gate, who announced the immanent appearance of a Manifestation of God in Iran (then Persia). His teachings had sound scriptural proofs and attracted a large number of adherents, and despite much opposition the Baha'i Faith was founded in 1863 by Bahauallah, the 'Glory of God'.

As an admirer of good literature, I was captivated by the beauty of Bahauallah's vast writings in which he taught that God has revealed, and will continue to reveal, his message to humanity through a succession of great Messengers - the Manifestations of God - and the message He was bringing was the unity of God, religion and humanity, the ultimate goal of which being world peace. The whole range of His teachings emphasizes the importance of the individual search for truth...Ah, I could think for myself!

Bahauallah's life was one of continual exile and imprisonment because of His beliefs, and after His death in 1892 His eldest son, Abdul-Baha, devoted the rest of his life to expounding the faith to the peoples of East and West, and he in turn appointed his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, to be Guardian of the Faith. He worked ceaselessly guiding the destiny of what became a world-wide community.

We believe in a divinely instituted administrative order, without clergy, governed by the Universal House of Justice - a body of nine elected every five years by secret ballot without candidature or canvassing. Each country has a National Spiritual Assembly, and each town has a Local Spiritual Assembly, which organises the 19-day feasts which are a blend of worship and fellowship promoting and sustaining the unity of the Baha'i community.

I have the privilege of serving on the Birmingham L.S.A, and find much joy and peace in being a member of the Baha'i Faith. I would like to close with a prayer of Bahauallah's which, for me, sums up the Baha'i Faith:

"God grant that the light of unity may envelop the whole earth, and that the seal, the Kingdom is God's, may be stamped upon the brow of all it's peoples."

Joan Mensor is Baha'i representative on the Birmingham Council of Faiths Executive

Diwali

The Indian festival known as Diwali has a reputation for glamour, colourful lights, dance and music. It is this side of it that will be in evidence during the all-afternoon public celebration at Millennium Point on Sunday, 9 November. All of this week, however, Hindus and Sikhs have been observing the religious duties that are the important basis of the festival.

Hindus underline family relationships over a five-day period. It is the time to renew bonds and look ahead with renewed enthusiasm and starts at home with prayers for the continued creation of wealth. Next day there are prayers to Krishna, who overcame a tyrant ruler, so it is justice and freedom that are commemorated. For some too the extended family is re-united and rivalries are set aside.

On the third day, Hindus welcome Diwali with candles and decorations. Traditionally this was when Lord Rama returned from exile so it is dedicated to the victory of good over evil and the deliverance from dark to light. Now too bonds are renewed or people resolve to turn a new leaf.

On the following day the New Year starts - 2065 by the Hindu reckoning. It is marked by exchange of gifts, sweets and good wishes. Community feasts are held at temples to which all contribute and in which all share. The final day is dedicated to the brother-sister bond when men folk visit their sisters (although nowadays this is put off to the next convenient weekend.)

For their part, Sikhs too celebrate a return and victory over a tyrant with illuminations from earthen oil lamps or candles, and with prayers. This takes place both in Gurdwaras and in homes.

The story behind it goes back to the time when Sikhs were struggling for freedom from Mughal rule. The Emperor Jahangir detained Guru Hargobind in Gwalior Fort because he was afraid of his growing popularity. With him 52 Rajas were also detained and became very attached to the Guru because of his teaching about spirituality, mercy, compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, respect and obedience to parents.

At the same time the Emperor Jahangir was constantly unwell and could not sleep at night. The Emperor's wife, Noor Jahan, along with Sai Mia Mir, a well respected Muslim Sufi and mystic, and other prominent Muslims prevailed upon the Emperor to release Hargobind. But the Guru refused to leave unless his fellow captives could go with him.

As a compromise, Jahangir allowed as many Rajas as could hold on to the Guru's cloak to leave. Then Hargobind had a special cloak made with 52 long tassels and all walked free together, each holding on to a tassel. Now they all made their way first to Harmandir Sahib (popularly known as the Golden Temple) for a thanksgiving service. To welcome the Guru, devotees lit up the temple and the whole city of Amritsar.

This day has since been celebrated with spectacular fireworks as well – as we're sure you must have noticed!

*Our thanks to **Mahendra Dabhi**, President of Shree Hindu Community Centre, and to **Sewa Singh Mandla** of the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha, who provided the material for this joint article.*