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Choose a good photograph of an aerial view of the Ka'bah, the black cubed-shaped structure in Makkah, with thousands of pilgrims continuously circling it in an unending vortex. Look at it closer. It gives you the impression of a large stone thrown right in the middle of the earth. You will notice that the "ripples" created by the thousands of people going round and round it give off a tremendous amount of energy as they are magnetically drawn closer and closer to the Ka'bah ... until they altogether disappear into the middle. This process of continuous attraction continues infinitely.

This impression is not co-incidental and nor is it a mind-game. When the entire earth was under water after creation, this was the first piece of land to pop up from whence the entire earth spread. All creation is instinctively drawn back to it, similar to a salmon which swims upstream to return to its original spawning nest after completing its cycle of life and similar to a moth drawn to a flame.

Geographically, the Ka'bah is situated upon the "naval" of the earth – GPS co-ordinates 21.4225 o N, 39.8261o E. All the magnetic lines of the earth neatly criss-cross over the Ka'bah. It is a place of tremendous spiritual energy over which neither aeroplanes nor birds fly. From the nearly two billion Muslims alive today, many millions are annually attracted to the Ka'bah during the five days of Hajj (annual pilgrimage) and look forward to form part of this vortex leading closer and closer to the source of all power – God, the Almighty.

What does the Ka'bah Symbolise?

No, God does not "reside" in the Ka'bah as many mistakenly think, nor is the Ka'bah a huge idol beneath which lies an immense amount of treasure which the pilgrims take home with them. The Ka'bah is also not an alien building to which Muslims foolishly prostrate to. Rather, it was physically built by many chosen ones from rocks obtained from the adjacent mountains of Makkah to be used as a point of unification in worship. Before the Ka'bah, Masjidul Aqsa was granted this honour and the people of all previous Prophets faced this Mosque when praying. The Ka'bah symbolises the Unity of God (tauheed) and the utter dependence and sure destruction of all creation one day.

God resides in the heart of everyone, but the journey to His house is undertaken to create a spectacle of grandeur which is only befitting of God. There is no gathering in the world today which is totally dedicated to God and God alone that is as majestic as the Hajj. People of all races, of all statures, and of all economic backgrounds gather around the Ka'bah, clad in a simple white garment called the Ihraam, to celebrate one God in unision. Thus, the overwhelming theme of Hajj is unity.

The Hajj is the fifth pillar of Islam, and the lesson of unity witnessed in Makkah is meant to be taken home after the five-day event. Unity means that all Muslims need to believe in the fundamentals of Islam, like the oneness of God, acceptance of all prophets and their scriptures,

in death and in life after death, as well as predestination. Everyone needs to pray, fast and give charity and upkeep the legacy of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), but there may be variations and preferences in practicing them. Whilst people need to agree on all the fundamentals, there is room for difference of opinion in practicing Islam which many Muslims don't tolerate of each other. Unity thus translates in to respect and tolerance for each other – something Muslims sorely lack nowadays.

God created everyone different by design. In a family of six, one child will be an intellectual whilst the other will be more resourceful. One may be temperamental, and the other more composed. One may be pious and the other may be rebellious. However, each of these so called “negative” qualities has a positive side to it. Whilst the pious one may call towards good, he may need the protection of his more aggressive brother, and whilst the intelligent one may be able to do the family's legal work, the more resourceful one will be able to take it of any mess. There is a place for everybody in the family, and also in the ummah (nation) of Islam. No one is above another and no one is an outcast. God then further divided mankind into tribes and nations so as to appreciate, cooperate and recognise each other, not to discriminate against one another. The coming together of the entire human race in front of the Ka'bah is a reminder that there is a common platform in this world to unite upon. There is still hope.

On a practical level, we can implement the lesson of unity learnt in Makkah in the Masjids we attend five times a day in our cities like Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban. But is this happening? I was say with due respect, but we have Kokney Masjids and Surtee Masjids, Somali Masjids and Indian Masjids, Malay Masjids and Memon Masjids, Turkish Masjids and Bengali Masjids, Masjids for the foreigners and Masjids for the locals, Tableeghi Masjids and Sunni Masjids, Sufi Masjids and Salafi Masjids, Hanafi Masjids and Shafi Masjids, as well Tourist Masjids and Township Masjids!! If this is not confusing enough, we have Breakaway Masjids and Family-run Masjids, as well as Sole-Ownership Masjids and All-Welcome Masjids. But the headache is still one side. If you want a real migraine, then you need to decide which Imam is best suited for you: the one who makes loud du'a, soft du'a or no dua after prayers, loud zikr or soft zikr, the one who gives a long lecture on Jumu'ah or the “express” Imam who gets you on the highway as fast as possible, or the Imam who recites like Shaikh Mahir Muayqili or the one whose motto is “up down, kiss the ground, and back to town.”. All this determines which Masjid you choose to go. The migraine will progress to a stroke when you consider that many people simply pray at home to avoid all the politics, or who constantly complain that the air conditioner is too cold for them, or out of sheer laziness. No wonder all our pharmacies are so busy in the Indian areas - there is a wide variety of pains to deal with!!

But where is the main community Masjid? Is our loyalty to a clan or to God?

Makkah also has many smaller Masjids within it, but there is only one main Masjid there - the Haram which contains the Ka'bah. Every town and city is supposed to be designed in this way: there should be one Jaami (central) Masjid, and many smaller Masjids, but we have made it the opposite. We have many Jaami Masjids, and no small Masjids. The fact is that if we have one main Jaami Masjid, we will have to forget our petty differences, and it can happen if we want to. So, let us take the first bold step: fashion our towns and cities after Makkah and see the blessings multiplying in our lives. If there is no unity, there can be no brotherhood, and if there is

no brotherhood, then we have none to blame but ourselves when the USA and her allies continue to bomb the Muslims to pieces, whilst we are still worried about who is better than who. This is the first step towards unity.

Which Shopping List?

On a personal level, many prospective Hajees are excited – especially the first-timers – on embarking on such a significant trip. Many vow to utilise their time properly and compile a “spiritual shopping list” to complete. However, many others also compile a shopping list, but a more exciting one. It would typically read as follows: “1. Silver-Grey Daffah kurtah for my brother Ahmed, size M57; 2. Melt my old jewellery and choose the latest European style for my daughter Faaizah when she marries in 15 years; 3. Choose kaftans for my family, but I must buy a more expensive one for my favourite aunty and make sure my mother doesn’t see it; and 4. Buy 5 doz. designer PJs to sell to my neighbours when I return to South Africa in order to recover the money of my trip.”

The more serious Hajees will have this on their “shopping list”: “1. Perform all 40 Salaats in congregation in Madinah , 2. Make at least five extra tawaafs a day in Makkah, 3. Visit the various historical sites (do ziyaarah) and climb up Mount Hira where our Noble Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) received revelation; 4. Make a five-hour non-stop prayer in Arafaat, and 5. Make sure that any restaurant I visit serves halaal meat.”

No one should judge the sincerity of any Hajee, but the Hajee himself should judge himself as to how effective his Hajj was, based on two factors: 1. When he left Makkah, did he leave the Ka’bah behind or did he place it in his heart? Is there a burning desire to return over and over again to the Holy Lands? 2. Did his life change thereafter and for how long did this change last? For some, this change is for a lifetime, for some, it is for a few years, and for some it is until they disembark at OR Tambo International Airport and lie to the custom officer about the value of goods to be declared!!

Our Noble Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) predicted that a time will come when the rich will undertake the journey of Hajj for leisure, the middle-class for business, and the poor to beg. This prophecy is being fulfilled today as modern-day Makkah is in the best position to fulfil it. Makkah today is the seat of luxury and comfort of the Middle-East - the London and Paris of Europe. It has a clock which makes the Big Ben of London look like a dwarf and the hotels of New York look like shacks. It is also the hub of business and merchandise from all over the world finds its way there. Many Hajees thus find more thrill in shopping and bargain-hunting in such a shopper’s paradise than in praying. Let us be careful of these distractions.

Lastly, I wish all the Hajees a Hajj-e-Mabroor and wish you all a safe journey – ameen.