

Is the fast of Ashûraa similar to Passover or Yom Kippur?

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The fast of 'Ashūrā' was prescribed before the fast of Ramaḍān. The Jews observed it and so did the people of Arabia before the dawn of Islam. It is related by imām Bukhāri on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās that when the Prophet came to Madīnah he found that the Jews observed the fast of 'Ashūrā'. He enquired about it from them and was told that it was the day on which God had delivered the Children of Israel from the enemy and Moses used to keep a fast on it as an expression of gratitude to the Almighty. The Prophet thereupon, remarked that Moses has a greater claim upon me than upon you,' and he fasted on that day and instructed his followers to do the same.

It is also mentioned in Muslim that it is a most important day. On this day God had delivered Moses and his followers and drowned Pharaoh and his men. Moses fasted on it in thanksgiving. Imām Bukhāri adds that it is related by Abu Bishr: "We also keep fast as a token of respect to Moses."

But the celebrated mathematician Abu Rehan Beruni challenged the veracity of these reports on the basis of a comparative study of the Jewish and Arabian Calendars. He writes: "It is said that 'Ashur is a Hebrew word which has become 'Ashūrā' in Arabic. It stands for the tenth day of the Jewish month of Tisri. The fast observed on this day is called Yom Kippur. It came to be incorporated in the Arab Calendar and the name was given to the tenth day of the first month of their year in the same way in which it denoted the tenth day of the first month of the Jewish Calendar. It was instituted as a day of fasting among the Muslims in the first year of Migration. Later, when fasting was enjoined in the month of Ramaḍān it was dropped. A Tradition has it that when the Prophet came to Madīnah and saw that the Jews observed the fast of 'Ashūrā' he enquired about it and was told that it was the day on which God had drowned Pharaoh and his people and delivered Moses and his followers from them, and Moses used to fast on it in thanksgiving. The Prophet, then, remarked that Moses had a greater claim upon him than upon them and he fasted on that day and instructed his followers to do the same. When the fasts of Ramadan were prescribed, the Prophet neither enjoined the fast of 'Ashūrā' nor forbade it.

But this report is fallacious and does not stand the test of enquiry. The first day of the month of Muḥarram in the first year of Hijrah (Migration) was Friday, which corresponds to the 16th of Tamuz, 933 (A.E.). As against it, the first day of that year among the Jews was Sunday, the 12th of Awwal which corresponds to the 29th of Safar. Hence, the fast of 'Ashūrā' should have fallen on Tuesday, the 9th of Rabi-ul-Awwal, while the Migration had taken place during the first half of that month. The two dates, at any rate, do not correspond to each other."

He adds: "The contention that on this day God had drowned the Pharaoh, too, is not supported by what is given in the Torah. The event of the drowning of the Pharaoh had taken place, according to Torah, on the 21st of Nisan, which is the seventh day of the festival of Passover. The first Jewish fast of Passover, after the arrival of the Prophet in Madīnah, occurred on Tuesday, the 22nd of Azhar 933 which corresponds to the 17th of Ramaḍān. This report also is, therefore, without a foundation."

With due respect to the scholarship of Beruni, it is clear that he has built his thesis wholly on conjecture. He has, for instance, surmised that the talk reported by Ibn 'Abbās and other Companions had taken place on the very first day of the Prophet's arrival in Madīnah as is evident from his observation, "when the sacred Prophet came to Madīnah or entered it."

This misconception is due to the ignorance of the science of Traditions and of the holy Companion's mode of narration, innumerable instances of which are available in the Traditions. For example, it is related by Anas b. Mālik: "When the Prophet came to Madīnah and (saw that) there were two days which the people of that place celebrated as festivals he enquired about their significance. (The people of Madīnah) told, 'These were our days of fun and entertainment during the days of Paganism.' The Prophet, thereupon, observed, 'God has given you two better days in their place, 'Īd al-Fiṭr and 'Īd al-Aḍḥa."

Now, will it be proper for anyone to infer from the above Tradition that the arrival of the Prophet in Madīnah took place on the same day that was the day of celebration in that town, and to proceed to question the veracity of the Tradition on the ground that it was not chronometrically possible? Similar errors of interpretation have been made in respect of other traditions as well, like the one relating to pollination in date palms.

Commenting on the argument advanced by Beruni, Allama Ibn-i-Hajr Asqallani says, "He found it difficult to accept the tradition due to the misunderstanding that when the Prophet arrived in Madīnah he saw the Jews in the state of keeping the fast of 'Ashūrā' while, in fact, it was in the month of Rabī' al-Awwal that the Prophet had come to Madīnah. The answer to it is that he has erred in the interpretation of the tradition. What the tradition actually means is that the Prophet came to know of the fast of 'Ashura only when he had migrated to Madīnah and made his enquiry, for the first time, after he had reached there. In other words, the Prophet, when he came to Madīnah and stayed there till 'Ashūrā', found that the Jews fasted on that day."

There is left no chronological contradiction after Allama Asqallani's explanation, in the Tradition regarding the fast of 'Ashūrā'.

The second misconception under which Beruni labors is that the fast of 'Ashūrā' mentioned in the Tradition signifies the tenth day of the Jewish month of Tisri, which is also known as Yom Kippur or the Fast of Atonement and is observed by them with greater ceremony than any other fast. But there is nothing in the tradition to warrant such a conclusion, and the Torah does also not support it because the Fast of Atonement was instituted in expiation of a mortal sin and observed as a day of penance and mourning.

The Day of Atonement, which is the tenth day of the seventh month of Tisri, is referred to in these words in the Third Book of Moses called, Leviticus:

"And this will be a statute for ever unto you; that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, ye shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether it be one of your own country, or a stranger who sojourneth among you: for on that day shall the priest make an atonement for you, to cleanse you, that ye may be clean from all your sins before the Lord. It shall be a Sabbath of rest unto you, and ye shall afflict your souls, by a statute forever" (Lev. 16:29-31)

At another place, in the same Book, it is said: "And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying, also on the tenth day of this seventh month there shall be a day of atonement: it shall be a holy convocation unto you; and ye shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord. And ye shall do no work in that same day; for it is a day of atonement to make an atonement for you before the Lord your God." (Lev. 23:26-28)

Similarly, in the Book of Numbers, it is set forth: “And ye shall have on the tenth day of this seventh month a holy convocation; and ye shall afflict your souls; ye shall not do any work therein.”

On the other hand, it explicitly occurs in the traditions that the day of 'Ashūrā' (on which the Muslims are enjoined to fast) was a day of rejoicing among the Jews. As imām Bukhāri has related it on the authority of Abu Mūsa Ashari, the Jews regarded it to be a day of 'Īd and it was on seeing it that the holy Prophet advised his Companions also to keep fast on it.

In Saheeh Muslim, also, it is related from Qais bin Muslim that men of good-doing observed the fast of 'Ashūrā' and celebrated it as the day of 'Īd, with their women wearing the best of clothes and ornaments. The Prophet, on seeing it, said to us, “You should also fast on this day.”

It is, further, related by Koraib bin S'ad from 'Umar b. Al-Khaṭṭāb that, “On the Day of Judgment God will ask you only about two fasts, the fasts of Ramaḍān and the fast of the day of adornment (i.e., 'Ashūrā').”

In the light of the facts given above, it will be incorrect to say that 'Ashūrā' is the Day of Atonement. Were it so, it would have been a day of lamentation and mortification while 'Ashūrā', as mentioned in the tradition, is a day of merriment and decoration.

The same fallacy is shared by a number of Western scholars as well. As for instance, Abraham Katish observes about the Day of Atonement in his book entitled, 'Judaism in Islam,' that “Muḥammad, in the beginning, instituted it as a day of fasting for Muslims.”

The assertion of the Jews themselves about 'Ashūrā' that it was the day on which God had delivered the Israelites from their enemies is enough to set at rest all doubts in this connection. In the Torah it has been repeatedly mentioned as Abib which later came to be known as Nisan. About Abib, we read in Dairatul M'aarif, “it is a Hebraic word which means 'green'. It is the name of the first month of the Hebraic year. This name was given to it by Moses and it corresponds nearly to the month of April. When the Jews were exiled in Babylon they changed its name to Nisan, meaning 'the month of flowers.' Their 'Īd-ul-Fateer (Passover) is also held in the middle of it.”

Beruni, also, has admitted that it is wrong to suppose that the Day of Atonement signified the day on which God had drowned Pharaoh and his men. He says, “Their contention that on this day God had drowned Pharaoh is opposed to what is stated in the Torah because the event of drowning took place on the 21st of Nisan, which is the seventh day of Ayam-ul-Fateer (Passover). It is set forth in Torah (Ex. 12: 18): 'In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at even, ye shall eat unleavened bread, until the one and twentieth day of the month at even'.”

We, therefore, conclude that 'Ashūrā', which is mentioned in the traditions related by Ibn 'Abbās and others and on which day the Muslims have been exhorted to fast and was included among the near-obligatory duties in Islam before the fasts of Ramaḍān were prescribed, corresponds, in the largest measure, to the day which falls in the middle of the Hebraic month of Abib, whose name was changed to Nisan by the Jews during the period of their exile in Babylon and was celebrated by them as an 'Īd and an event of fasting and entertainment. It was on this day that the Israelites had come out of Egypt and the

Pharaoh was drowned. In the second Book of Moses it is related: "And Moses said unto the people, Remember this day in which ye came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the Lord brought you out from this place; there shall no leavened bread be eaten. This day came ye out in the month of Abib." (Ex. 13: 3-4)

In sum, the general consensus among Muslim theologians and religious scholars is that 'Ashūrā' fell on the tenth day of the Arab month of Muharram in the second year of Migration and that it was later annulled by Ramaḍān.

Besides, any attempt to make the Lunar Arabian Calendar correspond to the Solar Jewish Calendar can, at the best, be only hypothetical. The ancient custom of Nasi has also taken a hand in adding to the confusion. This practice was quite common in Arabia, both before and after the advent of Islam, till it was prohibited by the Qur'anic injunction which reads: Postponement of a month is only an excess of disbelief, whereby those who disbelieve are misled. (ix: 37)

On the occasion of the Farewell Ḥajj, the holy Prophet had declared, "Time has returned to the original state that obtained when the heavens and the earth were created". These words were of Divine Inspiration for the Arab arrangement of time into days, weeks, months and years had been changed so frequently that it could not be relied upon nor restored to its original form through mathematical calculation. It is, therefore, incorrect to question the authenticity of successive Traditions merely on the basis of an erratic and inconstant Calendar.

It is also possible that the Jews of Madīnah were different from the other Jewish communities where the fast of 'Ashūrā' was concerned and observed it with greater enthusiasm and regularity, and, in this respect, they were similar to the Arabs who, seeing that so many important events had taken place on that day, fasted on it out of reverence.

It is related by 'Ā'ishah, "the Quraish fasted on the day of 'Ashūrā' during the period of Ignorance and the sacred Prophet also kept it." (Muslim). Further, the fast days among the Jews living in different countries differed from one another. We have seen how in the Jewish Encyclopedia it is indicated that apart from the fixed fast-days many fasts of a local or national character had become established among the Jews from the early days, which varied from place to place. Private fasts were also common among the Jews and one could take it upon oneself to fast on certain days in memory of certain events or at the time of adversity to arouse God's mercy. In these circumstances, it is quite possible that the fast of 'Ashūrā', on the tenth day of the first month of the Arab Calendar, was peculiar to the Jews living in Arabia alone. Perhaps, it is for this reason that the Talmud and the Jewish Calendar are silent on this score. Some historians have treated it as identical! to the Fast of Atonement which all the Jews, wherever they be, consider obligatory. Thus, those who subscribe to this view are inclined to doubt the veracity of the afore-mentioned traditions. But their judgment is influenced by the ignorance of the habits and practices of the Jews living in various parts of the world, specially in Arabia where they had been settled for generations as a distinct community, possessing their own beliefs and customs and receiving local impressions in the historical course of things.