

Wherever they live, Muslims worldwide are expected to fulfill the obligations of Ramadan as one of their Five Pillars of Faith. This article describes how a Rochester, Minn., family observes Ramadan. How do the month's activities help strengthen their knowledge and commitment to Islam? What other impact does the celebration have?

# A Time *By Dawn Schuett*

## *to Learn Discipline, Self-Restraint and Generosity*

**O**n a dark, cold, January morning, members of the Ibrahim and Gail Ouda family awaken before sunrise.

It isn't work or school that prompts them to rise at 5:30 a.m., still a little groggy from a night's sleep. It's their religious faith. Each day, the Oudas and millions of other Muslims around the world practice their religion by praying at five different times, depending on the position of the sun. The first prayer is said about 1+ hours before sunrise.

During the holy month of Ramadan ... the early morning prayer also marks the beginning of a day of fasting. Muslims abstain from eating, drinking and other sensual pleasures from dawn to sunset.

In addition to fasting and praying, Muslims observe Ramadan by reading the Koran, the holy book of Islam.

"The month of Ramadan is training for your soul," says Ibrahim Ouda.

Ibrahim, 34, is a Palestinian who was born in Kuwait but has lived in the United States for the past 16 years. He works for IBM. Gail Ouda, also 34, was born and raised in America as a Lutheran. She is a homemaker.

Married for 14 years, Ibrahim and Gail met at South Dakota State University. She converted from Christianity to Islam about six years ago to make it easier to raise their children as Muslims. They are the parents of four sons, Ahmad, 12, Sami, 7, Yusef, 6, and Malik, 11 months.

The Oudas observe Ramadan as a family. The older children practice fasting with their parents, although they are not at the age where they are required to fast.

At work or at school, it's sometimes difficult for Muslims to fast during Ramadan, Ibrahim says. Not everyone understands the importance of Ramadan to Muslims.

### The Religion of Islam

As a religion and way of life, Islam is about peace, mercy and forgiveness. Those who follow Islam are called Muslims. Muslims believe in one God, called "Allah" in the Arabic equivalent, and they believe in the Day of Judgment and individual accountability for actions. They believe in a series of prophets beginning with Adam and including Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses, David, Solomon and Jesus. God's eternal message was reaf-

firmed and finalized by the Prophet Muhammad.

Through the Angel Gabriel, God revealed his exact words to Muhammad during Ramadan. God's words are recorded in the Koran.

The start of Ramadan depends on the Islamic lunar calendar. The holy month begins 10 to 16 days earlier each year ...

Ramadan is a time to learn discipline, self-restraint and generosity while obeying God's commandments. Fasting during the holy month is one of the five pillars of Islam. The others include the declaration of faith; charitable giving; prayer; and pilgrimage to Mecca, the Islamic holy city.

Muslims believe the benefits they gain from fasting include an increased compassion for those in need of the necessities of life, a sense of self-purification and reflection, and a renewed focus on spirituality. During Ramadan, Muslims also share a feeling of togetherness as they spend more time with family and friends.

### A Day During Ramadan

The Oudas get up earlier during Ramadan so they can eat a small meal, called "su-

hoor," before the first day's prayer and the start of the fast. After the meal, they drink water and eat dates, which symbolizes how Muhammad began a day of fasting.

Before prayer, Muslims must also wash.

Ibrahim Ouda says the hands, mouth and nose are washed three times. Then the face is washed from the hairline to the chin and from ear to ear three times. The forearms from the fingers to the elbows are washed three times.

The right forearm is done first and then the left. Hair is also wiped from front to back with water. And then the feet up to the ankles are washed three times.

"By doing it three times, you make sure you don't miss any area," Ibrahim says.

Muslims must also pray in a clean area. In the Ouda home, just as in the mosque, shoes are not worn where the praying is done.

After eating the early morning meal and washing up, the Oudas wait for the call to prayer, which they have programmed on their computer. On this morning, the call to prayer comes at 6:18 a.m.

#### Prayers Facing Mecca

Ibrahim, Gail, Ahmad and Sami stand quietly in the family's living room, facing northeast toward Mecca. Ibrahim leads the prayer for the family. A few minutes later, Ibrahim ends the prayer as he turns his head to the right and left, saying "Peace be upon you" in Arabic.

Gail and the boys return to bed for a few more hours of sleep. Ibrahim usually reads the Koran during his quiet time before the family gets up for the day.

With some variation, the family will pray again four more times during the day. Ibrahim takes his older sons to the mosque for the noon prayer. Ibrahim returns to the mosque by himself that night for special prayers, called "taraweeh."

Between prayer times during Ramadan, the Oudas stay busy to keep their minds off food.

They try to avoid grocery shopping when they're fasting.

"When you're fasting, everything sounds good," Ibrahim says.

But Muslims don't consider fasting to be a hardship or a punishment. "During the

day of Ramadan, you try to make yourself a better person," Ibrahim says.

After the 4:45 p.m. prayer, the Oudas break their fast.

Many Muslims consider breaking the daily fast to be a social event and they invite other Muslims to share that time with them. This year, between 100 to 200 Muslims break their fast daily at the mosque in Rochester where they share a meal. Many others, like the Oudas, break the fast at home.

The most important day during Ramadan is Lailat ul-Qadr, or "Night of Power." The special day marks the anniversary of the night on which Muhammad first began receiving revelations from God through the Angel Gabriel. Lailat ul-Qadr is one of the last odd-numbered nights of Ramadan.

Ramadan is expected to end during the week-end when the crescent moon is sighted. Then, Muslims will begin to celebrate the conclusion of Ramadan with a three-day celebration called Eid al-Fitr.

*Courtesy of Post-Bulletin,  
Rochester, Minn.*

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