

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The title of my presentation is “You are what you eat, Food for the soul.” I will begin with verse of the Quran “(An’am 6:121) do not eat that on which Allah’s name hasn’t been mentioned.”

We will discuss why food, in particular meat, must be halal and what effect does this have on our spiritual development.

One of the things that is important to understand before we see the Islamic perspective of halal and haram food is how food breaks down in our body and the connection between food and our thinking.

If you break down food into its simplest forms, you will find that food is composed of proteins, fats, carbohydrates including sugars, water, minerals and vitamins. Even more interesting is that if you could break down human body into its simplest forms, you would find the human body is composed of proteins, fats carbohydrates including sugars, water, minerals and vitamins. So, we are like one big ginger bread!

Let’s look at it this way...We are really just Souls, not a body; the body is just this big food house that we live inside!

That is why Islam is very particular about food especially about meat. Islam is a beautiful religion that doesn’t cut out meat completely from your life, but again doesn’t even tell you to eat every four footed creature you come across. Not going into details, this is just an idea of how balanced Islam is. When we look at human beings on this planet, they eat a lot of different kinds of meat that Muslims don’t eat, E.g. sharks, frogs, octopuses etc, also organs like liver, brain, kidney, pancreas etc. so the point is, Islam doesn’t say eat anything and everything. It has a very balanced opinion; a Muslim is required to eat only some types of meat, which has to be prepared in a particular manner. Furthermore, Islam recommends not to eat too much meat, it limits the consumption of meat, and this is true Islam, in everything there is moderation.

Let’s move on and see why Islam says it is haram to eat certain kinds of food and what their effect is on our spirituality. When we say this food is haram, it can mean 4 things. I will mention each and elaborate a little.

1. Eating the meat of an animal that is forbidden.

There are certain animals whose natural laws doesn’t agree with the natural laws of human beings, we should keep in mind that when Islam forbids us from certain creature, it is not because Islam degrades them or because they are ugly or dirty.... It is because their characteristics don’t agree with human nature. For e.g. a lot of non-Muslims have this idea, that Muslims hate dogs. Islam doesn’t say dogs are ugly/ bad creatures that need to be killed, when Islam says don’t keep dogs at home; the reason to it has to do with human nature not being compatible with that of a dog. In the same way, like eating some kinds of animals meat would be harmful physically or spiritually.

Furthermore, many Ulama’s say that “when you eat the meat of a particular animal excessively, you can acquire certain traits and qualities of that particular animal”. Some qualities transfer to human beings very easily and some don’t. So there is some food-mood connection.

One particular creature that Islam strongly forbids is the pig. A pig has certain characteristics that are very different from other animals. One of the things for e.g. is that they eat excessively, you must have heard of the expression “he eats like a pig”. Another thing about pigs is that they are extremely dirty creatures; they are most comfortable when they are rolling in their own waste, they eat their own waste, and from a spiritual perspective, Islam believes that a person who eats pork may acquire some qualities of being shameless and etc.

One Hadith says that the reason why consuming blood of an animal is haram is because blood removes mercy from the heart to the extent that a father can kill his own son without feeling any regret.

2. Eating the meat of an animal that is lawful, but it hasn’t been slaughtered lawfully

I began with the ayah of the Holy Quran “and do not eat that on which the name of God hasn’t been taken” we see the relevance of this with the slaughtering ahkam, of facing the quibla and reciting the name of God.

Just as the reciting of anything on water effects its molecular structure, so similarly taking the name of God while slaughtering may have an impact that makes it healthier for human consumption. Imam Ali (as) says: "I guarantee the person who takes the name of God before eating something, that particular food will not harm him." And some ulama's have said that, if there are various dishes on the table, every time you start eating a different dish, you should say bismillah..."

3. Not meat product, but mixed with something that is najis/haram. E.g. prepared by a non Muslim.

At times we hear people/ Muslims questioning this matter. We also hear things like, 'they are human too, we don't have to look down upon them, we are insulting them by not eating their food and more"

The answer to this is very simple, Islam is based on the foundation of monotheism that is belief in oneness of The Creator. Oneness means in practical form, whatever a believer does his actions should be all for the sake of seeking pleasure of Allah and only worship the one creator, the Lord of Universe. This is not required just because the Islamic ideology demands this. This is essential to maintain social justice. Those human beings who have been the victim of moral diseases will be self oriented and do everything to fulfill their never ending desires, hence resulting in injustice, tyranny and oppression. These diseases can only be cured by the medicine of Faith. Faith is having that power to detach human beings from his own self and connects him to the Creator.

The unbelievers do not possess belief in God, or they believe in Multi-gods. The component of Faith is missing in them. Hence, if a believer mixes up with them, it is very likely that the diseases (spiritual and psychological) present in them due to lack of faith will get transferred into believers. This is because it is proved that misguidance is adopted without any efforts, but to take guidance, you need to put efforts and accept it. That is why in Islamic laws they are considered impure, and anything impure, Islam wants you to purify it or stay away from it.

This impurity is not ritualistic but spiritual. This means we do not consider their body impure as that of pigs and dogs, but it is spiritual impurity. Whereas, the body is the means to reach the soul and that is why the rules of taharat are there in case of contact. Islam does not allow Muslims to abuse non-believers, the Holy Quran explicitly says : *"Allah does not forbid you respecting those who have not made war against you on account of you religion, and have not driven you forth from your homes, that you show them kindness and deal with them justly; surely Allah loves the doers of justice"* (mumtahinah, 60:8)

so it's a total misconception that we look down upon the unbelievers, when Islam says don't eat this food and that, the concern is the Muslim soul, the spiritual growth. It's not to do with the physical being or anything else.

4. The food that is perfectly lawful, prepared by Muslim, nothing najis in it, But the food was acquired unlawfully.

This very important point. It is normally ignored and taken very lightly. It is the most hidden kind of haram food that creeps in our bodies. This unnoticeable type of haram food causes hard heartedness.

If we read the incident of Karbala, we see that the 3rd Holy Imam -Imam Hussain (as) up to the last moment would try to reason and awaken the army of Yazid. He spoke to them saying: *"don't you see what you are doing? I am the grandson of the Holy Prophet, who are you killing? What will you say to the Prophet of God? For what sin are you killing me?"* His aim was to awaken them as He was the Imam of the time. But he found them totally unreceptive! Totally unwilling!!

Instead of listening to him, they were telling each other, beat the drums, so that no one would listen to the words of Hussain. At that point, Imam Hussain (as) says something very very important, very powerful.

He says: *"Yes! Indeed you will not listen to what I am saying, indeed you are unable to receive the message I am trying to give you"* why? He says *"your stomachs are filled with haram so there is a seal in your hearts"*

...the point I want to make here is, the battle of Karbala is taking place in Iraq, those people fighting imam are Muslims, who pray and fast, and according to Islamic laws, if a Muslim slaughters an animal, that is halal... so from fiqh point of view the meat/food the Yazid's army were consuming is halal, the animals they kept, food that was prepared was all halal. Yet, Imam is saying that you have filled your stomach with haram!

That must have been unlawfully earned wealth from which food was purchased. And that is extremely

important, because a lot of times we want spiritual growth, we want to listen to some great sheikh, aalim and become enlightened, but here is the point... When a person's heart is sealed with haram food, an Imam cannot guide him, who can guide him? Do you think Imam Khomeini or any other aalim can guide him if Imam Hussain (as) cannot? The problem is not on the side of Imam Hussain (as); the problem is on that side. So this is a very important point that we need to look at. It is a sign of a true believer that he eats moderately and is very careful about the source of his food.

These are the four kinds of haram food. I would also like to point out a makruhat with regards to eating...

Eating Excessively:

There are 2 by-products of eating excessively that are very harmful for us.

1. It causes Hard Heartedness: this refers to spiritual hard heartedness which means it creates veils and makes it difficult for a person to feel the presence or closer to Allah (s.w.t)
2. It causes Outburst of Desires and Lust: a Hadith clearly mentions that eating excessively will make one intoxicated, almost drunk and make one unreceptive to the divine call.

The 6th Imam states: "There is nothing more harmful for the heart of a believer than eating excessively, because it will cause 2 things, hardening of the heart and an outburst of lust".

This is something that we might have experienced ourselves, on occasions when we absently over-eat and after that if we sit on a prayer mat to worship Allah, we feel tired, our dua's don't seem to make an impact, we don't feel spiritually alive and so on.

To conclude, let's see what the Holy Qur'an says. If you read the ayah of the Holy Quran that talks about not eating the haram food, it emphasizes on the idea that it causes one to lean towards sin. It weakens ones spiritual will-power because it makes one more easily influenced by the whispers of Shaitan. It becomes harder for a person to resist temptation. Let's contemplate on two ayahs of the Quran and see the connection.

"(An'am,6:121) do not eat that on which the name of Allah has not been mentioned, for surely this is a transgression, and most surely the shaitan whispers or suggests to their friends that they should argue with you and if you obey them, then most surely, you will be of the polytheists"

"(Baqarah, 2:168) O mankind! Eat of the lawful and the good things out of what is in the earth, and do not follow the footsteps of shaitan. Surely he is an open enemy"

So we see the idea of shaitan is brought in again and again. It is a common pattern that you will see when Allah says do not eat haram, he then says beware of shaitan or shaitan will lead you astray. We need to think about this connection.

May Allah protect us.