

How do festivals, like Eid, shape Muslim faith?

Ben: Hello and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. I'm journalist and broadcaster Ben Hurst. I am also your host for this series where we'll be looking at the key beliefs and practices for your GCSE on Islam.

In this episode we're breaking down festivals in Islam and how they help shape faith. We'll explore how festivals link to Islamic principles and rituals, and how they build things like unity and gratitude.

And I'm really pleased to be joined by Mehreen Baig. Mehreen, over to you!

Mehreen: Thanks, Ben! Hi everyone, I'm Mehreen Baig - presenter, former teacher, and proud practising Muslim. I'm here to help you understand more about Islam and show how it connects to my life as a Muslim.

Ben: Love it. Before we begin, you might want to keep a pen and paper handy, or open your notes app, so you can jot down anything useful along the way.

Mehreen: And then we'll finish with a short quiz.

Ben: Remember you can find a full range of podcasts covering loads of GCSE subjects, like Chemistry, as well as Religious Studies - just go to BBC Sounds and search for Bitesize GCSE.

Mehreen: Ok. Ready to go!

Ben: Mehreen, what are the most significant Muslim festivals?

Mehreen: There are a few significant festivals and holy days that most Muslims around the world of all denomination, whether Sunni, Shi'a or others celebrate each

year - Eid ul-Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan, and Eid ul-Adha, which takes place after the Hajj pilgrimage, are the most significant. The word 'Eid' (E-I-D), sometimes spelled I-D, is the Arabic word for celebration or festival.

Ben: Let's start with Eid-ul-Fitr.

Mehreen: Eid-ul-Fitr comes right at the end of Ramadan, the ninth month in the Islamic lunar calendar, when Muslims who are able to fast, do so each day. Fasting, or sawm, is one of the Five Pillars in Islam for Sunni Muslims and part of the Ten Obligatory Acts in Shi'a belief. The festival itself takes place in the first days of Shawwāl, the month that follows Ramadan.

Ben: You can hear more about Ramadan in the episode about the Five Pillars of Islam. And definitely look for Eid playlists on BBC Asian Network! Let's hear a little more about Eid-ul-Fitr.

Mehreen: Let me read you this from chapter 2 verse 185 of the Qur'an:

"You should complete the number and glorify Allah for what He has guided you to."

Mehreen: This verse really captures the mood of Eid-ul-Fitr. After a month of fasting, it's a chance for people to reconnect, relax together and thank Allah for getting them through Ramadan.

Ben: Sounds like it's about connection as much as celebration?

Mehreen: It is - because people share meals, they visit relatives and just enjoy spending time together. It also helps me connect with my faith and my heritage, and it really emphasises this sense of community.

Ben: What else is important about Eid?

Mehreen: It's also about generosity and forgiveness. People exchange good wishes and gifts, try to repair relationships, and start afresh.

Eid-ul-Fitr also highlights the idea of the ummah, the global Muslim community, emphasising that Muslims share beliefs and responsibilities towards one another.

Ben: And charity is important too?

Mehreen: Absolutely. Many Muslims pay Zakat ul-Fitr, where a small payment is made so that people who are struggling financially can still enjoy Eid. It's normally given near the end of Ramadan and, in many communities, before the Eid prayer so those in need can share in the celebrations.

Ben: When is Eid-ul-Fitr celebrated?

Mehreen: Eid-ul-Fitr starts when the new moon is seen, and in practice it can last anywhere from one to three days. Different Muslim countries follow different moon-sighting decisions. For example, many Sunni Muslims go by the official moon sighting announcement made by religious authorities in Saudi Arabia, while many Shi'a Muslims use the moon sighting made by religious authorities in their own country. So even people living in the same city might celebrate on slightly different days.

Ben: Remember there are different branches of Islam, including Sunni and Shia. And is Eid-ul-Fitr a public holiday too, Mehreen?

Mehreen: Yes. In many Muslim-majority countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt, Eid is marked as an official holiday and life slows right down. In places like the UK, Muslims often book time off school or work, so they can join family prayers and celebrations.

Ben: How do Muslims celebrate Eid-ul-Fitr?

Mehreen: Muslims usually come together for special Eid prayers, often in a mosque or a large outdoor space, and listen to a sermon that focuses on themes like thankfulness and forgiveness. People greet one another with 'Eid Mubarak', which means 'have a blessed Eid'. In other countries they might have different greetings.

Ben: Eid is celebrated all over the world. So different cultures have their own traditions?

Mehreen: That's right. In Nigeria, people might say 'Barka da Sallah', which means happy Eid, while in Malaysia Eid is known as Hari Raya Aidilfitri, and people greet each other with 'Selamat Hari Raya'.

Ben: The message is the same, even if the words change?

Mehreen: Yes. Eid is also a time of remembrance. Many Muslims visit cemeteries to pray for family members who have died.

Ben: And it's a big celebration too, isn't it?

Mehreen: Absolutely. Around the world, families mark Eid in different ways. Many put on new or favourite outfits, tidy and decorate their homes, share big meals, swap cards or presents and, in some cultures, you'll see intricate henna patterns and lively community events.

Ben: And many of these forms of celebration are also repeated during Eid-ul-Adha, aren't they?

Mehreen: Yes, that's right.

Ben: That sounds like the perfect cue to explore the festival of Eid-ul-Adha!

Ben: Eid-ul-Adha is also known as The Festival of Sacrifice or Greater Eid. When does it take place?

Mehreen: Eid-ul-Adha begins on the 10th day of Dhū al-Ḥijjah - the last month of the Islamic lunar calendar - and lasts for 3 days.

As a Muslim I'm taught that this is a very significant event in the Muslim calendar and marks the end of Hajj in Makkah, the final Pillar and third Obligatory Act. Although Eid ul-Adha is also important for those not participating in Hajj.

Ben: Why is Eid ul-Adha so significant?

Mehreen: The festival remembers and honours Prophet Ibrahim who was willing to sacrifice his son Isma'il for Allah.

Let me read you this from the Qur'an, chapter 37 verse 102:

"My son, indeed I have seen in a dream that I (must) sacrifice you. He said, 'O my father, do as you are commanded'".

Mehreen: Eid-ul-Adha is linked to the story of Prophet Ibrahim, who had a dream that he should sacrifice his son Isma'il as an act of obedience to Allah. When Ibrahim went to carry this out, Allah stopped him and provided an animal to sacrifice instead.

Ben: Allah was testing Prophet Ibrahim?

Mehreen: Yes, he was. Many Muslims see this story as showing just how committed Ibrahim was to obeying Allah, even when it was incredibly difficult.

Ben: What happens during this festival?

Mehreen: The festival usually starts with a congregational prayer in the morning. Muslims come together, often in big prayer halls or open spaces, and listen to a talk, sometimes called a sermon.

Ben: And that sermon focuses on the story of Ibrahim?

Mehreen: Yes. It talks about Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice what mattered most to him, which in turn can influence many Muslims' commitment to Allah. The lesson is that faith isn't just about belief. It's about action and devotion.

Ben: Sounds like a festival with a strong message?

Mehreen: Yes. Eid-ul-Adha is a time for communal worship, celebration and helping those people who are most in need. It's also a moment to demonstrate and emphasise total devotion to Allah.

Ben: And as it's a festival of sacrifice, are Muslims expected to sacrifice something during this period?

Mehreen: In some countries, it might be an animal sacrifice. The meat is divided up between the community - particularly the poor and needy. Everyone tries to help who they can.

Ben: Does your family celebrate in any particular way, Mehreen?

Mehreen: We celebrate both Eids in similar ways, wearing new clothes and taking a day off, having family come over. But for Eid-ul-Adha, we pay for an animal to be sacrificed in Pakistan and the meat to be shared amongst the needy.

Ben: Thank you, Mehreen. Let's look at some of the other festivals and holy days shared by many Muslims globally.

Mehreen: Absolutely. A significant moment is in the first month of the Islamic New Year. But it's not celebrated in the same way other cultures or religions might mark new year. It tends to be about quiet reflection for different reasons for Sunni and Shi'a Muslims.

Ben: Any other festivals?

Mehreen: Ashura is also significant. For many Shi'a Muslims, it is a day of mourning for Imam Husayn, commemorating his martyrdom at the Battle of Karbala. Sunni Muslims, on the other hand, may fast on this day as an act of devotion.

Ben: Is it an important day for both branches, but marked differently?

Mehreen: Yes. Another key night is Laylat al-Qadr, the Night of Power, which falls during the last part of Ramadan. It marks the beginning of the Qur'an's revelation to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and is believed to be one of the holiest nights in the Islamic calendar.

Ben: How do Muslims mark this particular night?

Mehreen: Although the Night of Power lasts for one night, many Muslims spend extra time in worship, praying, reading the Qur'an, or making personal supplications. However, they are not required to worship for the entire night.

Ben: But the two major festivals in Islam are Eid-ul-Adha and Eid-ul-Fitr?

Mehreen: Yep! It's easy to muddle the two Eids, so here's a quick way to tell them apart. 'Adha' is linked to sacrifice, while 'Fitr' is about breaking the fast. You can remember with 'Fitr equals feast after fasting' to help

Ben: All the Fs - feast after fast for Fitr!!

Ben: It's time for a quiz Mehreen! Come on test me!

Mehreen: Alright Ben, this is a quick-fire. You ready?

Ben: As I'll ever be!

Mehreen: Ok. Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha are both examples of what?

Ben: They're festivals. Eid means festival in Arabic.

Mehreen: Yes Ben! When do these two festivals happen?

Ben: Eid-ul-Fitr happens at the end of Ramadan and Eid-ul-Adha occurs at the end of Hajj. You can remember it as Adha is for sacrifice and Fitr means to break fast.

Mehreen: Fantastic. Can you name two values or actions that both festivals encourage?

Ben: Community bonding and charity.

Mehreen: Perfect! You could also have said generosity and forgiveness.

Ben: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast.

Mehreen: In the next episode we'll be covering Exam Skills!

Ben: Remember there are loads of podcasts to help you with your GCSEs. Just search for Bitesize GCSE on BBC Sounds. See you next time!