

Why is Hajj pilgrimage significant for Muslims?

Ben: Hello and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. I'm a journalist, broadcaster, and your host Ben Hurst. In this series we'll be going over the key beliefs and practices for your GCSE on Islam.

And in this episode, we're finding out why Hajj is significant to Muslims. We'll explore its influence on belief and unity, and how it affects Muslims spiritually and socially.

And joining me is fellow broadcaster Mehreen Baig. Hi Mehreen!

Mehreen: Hey Ben! Thanks for having me. I used to teach GCSE students, and as a Muslim myself, I'm really looking forward to sharing my very special experience of Hajj in this episode. Not just the practical side, but also the impact it had on me as a Muslim.

Ben: Brilliant. Now, if you've got a pen and paper, or notes app on your phone, get it ready for some quick notes as we go.

Mehreen: At the end, we'll have a short quiz to help you check what you remember.

Ben: Don't forget you can find a full range of podcasts covering loads of GCSE subjects, like History, as well as Religious Studies. Just go to BBC Sounds and search for Bitesize.

Mehreen: Right, let's get started!

Ben: Hajj is the last of the Five Pillars of Islam and the third of the Ten Obligatory Acts and it is a vital act of worship that all Muslims, who are financially and physically able to, are expected to complete once in their life.

Mehreen: Yeah, Hajj is a really significant part of many Muslims' lives. Every year more than a million Muslims make the pilgrimage to Makkah (or Mecca) in Saudi Arabia to perform Hajj..

Ben: Now remember a pilgrimage is a special journey made for religious reasons to a sacred site.

Mehreen: That's right. Makkah is the city where the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him) was born. Hajj can have a big influence on strengthening many Muslims' faith, obedience and community.

Ben: And certain actions take place when you get to Makkah.

Mehreen: Absolutely. The pilgrimage includes a series of rites and rituals, formal, symbolic acts of worship, many of which are performed in a specific order.

Ben: Let's look in more detail at Hajj. Tell me about what it means to perform Hajj, Mehreen.

Mehreen: Performing Hajj is about community and social bonds, and it allows Muslims to demonstrate the depth of their faith.

Ben: Why is Hajj significant to you personally?

Mehreen: I always wanted to take my parents to perform hajj, so i saved up my money for nearly 10 years and finally took them in 2019. It is, in my eyes, my greatest achievement. I knew it would be special, but actually, in the end, for me, it was really life-changing.

Ben: And Hajj has to happen at a particular time of year, doesn't it?

Mehreen: That's right. Hajj happens every year during Dhul Hijjah, which is the twelfth and final month in the Islamic year. This is because the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him) began the Hajj approximately 1400 years ago, during the month of Dhul Hijjah.

Ben: And we talked about Hajj taking place in Makkah - why is this location so important?

Mehreen: It's the holiest city in Islam and the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him). Makkah is considered the centre of the Islamic faith.

Ben: And something else significant happened here too, didn't it?

Mehreen: Yes. Islam teaches that Allah commanded the Prophet Ibrahim to take his wife Hajira and their son Isma'il to the desert valley of Makkah. Ibrahim was then instructed to leave them there with only a small amount of food and water.

Ben: What happened next?

Mehreen: When the water ran out, Hajira ran back and forth between the two hills of Safa and Marwah in search of help. Unable to find any, she prayed to Allah, and the well of Zamzam sprang from the ground to provide water.

Ben: And this forms the basis of the rituals pilgrims take part in during Hajj?

Mehreen: It does and the first one is Ihram. Ihram is the physical state, wearing specific clothing, and mental state, having the intention to perform Hajj.

Ben: A way of getting into the right head space?

Mehreen: That's right. It's the special state Muslims enter at the start of Hajj.

Ben: Tell us more about Ihram Mehreen.

Mehreen: Firstly, Pilgrims begin at a point just outside Makkah called the Miqat, which is a point where Pilgrims prepare by washing, praying, stating their intention, and changing into simple white clothing.

Ben: And that clothing is part of the symbolism?

Mehreen: Yes, wearing the same simple clothes shows that everyone is equal before Allah. It doesn't matter where you're from, how much money you have, or who you are - everyone is united. You are part of the Ummah which means the Muslim community.

On my own journey, I personally saw people from a range of backgrounds all dressed exactly the same, praying shoulder to shoulder. It was beautiful

Ben: So next we're going to hear what happens once you pass the Miqat.

Mehreen: The journey starts when the pilgrims arrive at the holy mosque of Masjid al-Haram - Islam's most important mosque and holiest site which surrounds the Ka'aba.

Ben: And why is the Ka'aba significant?

Mehreen: When the prophet Ibrahim returned to his wife and son, he was commanded to build a stone building called the Ka'aba as a shrine dedicated to Allah where worship would take place. And this forms the centre of worship during Hajj.

Ben: And what happens here?

Mehreen: A key ritual, called Tawaf, which involves walking around the Ka'aba seven times in worship.

Next a drink is taken from the Zamzam Well in remembrance of Hajira's search for water. This shows Muslims' dependence on Allah.

Ben: This sounds like they are preparing for something?

Mehreen: Yes - the ritual of Sa'y, where pilgrims move back and forth between the Safa and Marwah hills seven times, retracing Hajira's search for water.

Ben: Is this about copying the actions of Hajira?

Mehreen: Well remembered! It represents Hajira's perseverance and her faith in God's help. Then the pilgrims perform Wuquf which means asking for forgiveness. They do this gathered on top of Mount Arafat which is a few kilometers from Makkah.

Ben: Why at this particular spot?

Mehreen: This is where the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him) gave one of his final sermons and it's where many Muslims believe the Day of Judgement will take place.

Ben: What do we mean by Day of Judgement?

Mehreen: Islam teaches that on the Day of Judgement, everyone will be raised and judged by Allah.

Ben: Got it. Ok, what happens next?

Mehreen: Pilgrims then spend the night at a place called Muzdalifa where they collect pebbles.

Once they arrive at Mina the following day, they throw pebbles at three stone pillars, called the Jamarat.

Ben: Remember you'll find more information on Hajj on the Bitesize website - just search 'Bitesize GCSE Religious studies, Hajj'. This is so interesting. Tell me about the end of the journey?

Mehreen: The final stage is marked by Eid-ul-Adha, the Festival of Sacrifice. It's celebrated by many Muslims all over the world, not just those on Hajj.

After that, pilgrims return to Makkah to complete the final rituals, including circling the Ka'aba again.

Ben: It sounds physically demanding.

Mehreen: It can be, especially as it's usually very hot with little shade. But personally I would describe it as deeply transformative. Plus they have people who spray you with water!

Take a listen to this from the Qur'an, chapter 2 verse 196:

“And complete the Hajj and Umrah for Allah.”

Mehreen: So, in this episode we have explored what Muslims do when performing Hajj and why it matters. We have looked at the specific stages of Hajj and explained why they are significant for Muslims.

Ben: It's time for a quick quiz - want to test me, Mehreen?!

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

Ben: Let's do it.

Mehreen: Where does Hajj take place each year?

Ben: Makkah (or Mecca).

Mehreen: Really nice! Name two rituals performed at Hajj.

Ben: Tawaf which is when pilgrims circle the Ka'aba anticlockwise seven times. And Sa'y which is the act of running between the hills of Safa and Marwah seven times.

Mehreen: Correct! Name one way Hajj is significant to many Muslims spiritually.

Ben: Many Muslims believe that the pilgrimage can lead to forgiveness of sins by purifying the soul.

Mehreen: Correct!

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

Mehreen: Next time we'll be exploring why Eid and other festivals matter in Islam.

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!