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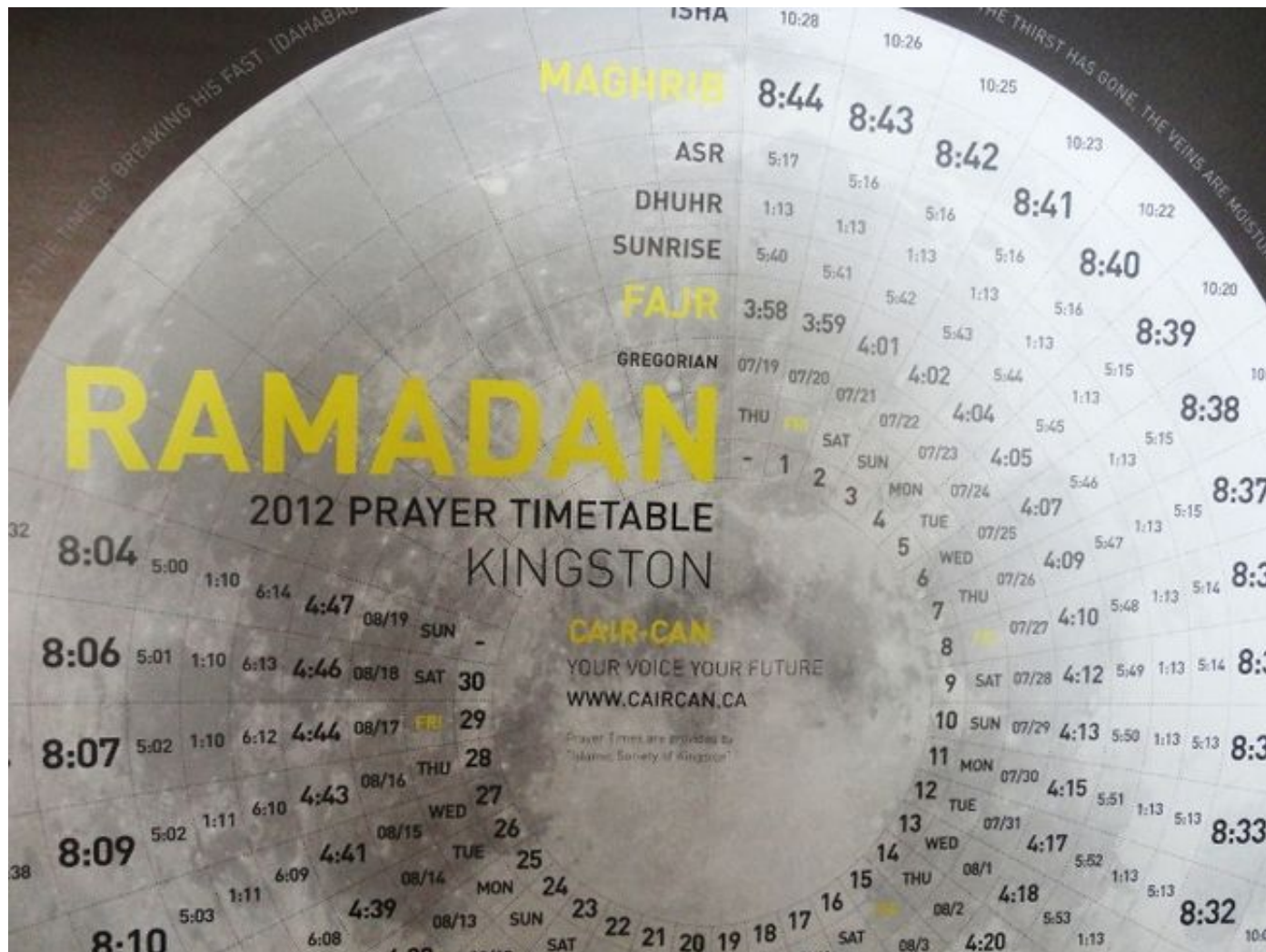
NEWS LOCAL

ISLAM

More to Ramadan than fasting



By Tori Stafford, Kingston Whig-Standard
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Ramadan begins Friday.

KINGSTON - With one of the most significant religious events of the year upon him, Imam Sikander Hashmi is a very busy man, planning out a month's worth of activities for the local Muslim community as they observe Ramadan.

And while fasting is the first thing most people relate to the religious holiday that occurs annually as the ninth month of the Islamic

calendar, marked by the first sighting of the crescent moon, it is but one aspect of the month-long event, Hashmi explained. And the fasting itself is done for a number of reasons.

“There's a few purposes behind the fasting,” said Hashmi, the imam of the Kingston Islamic Centre.

“The purpose that is given primarily in the Qur'an is to increase consciousness of God.”

Hashmi explained this idea: During Ramada, Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset, during the month with both the longest days and the most heat. During this time, he said, it is easy for one observing Ramadan to think 'Well, I just want a sip of water,' or 'I'll just take one bite of that bread.' But, in stepping back from the temptation of the situation, one realizes the act of breaking the fast would also be observed by God

“I don't (give in), it's because I realize that I'm conscious of God's presence and the fact that God's watching over me,” Hashmi said.

“And the idea behind that is to then develop that instinct that even after Ramadan. We build that mechanism where we become conscious of God's presence, and that stops us, or acts as a deterrent from acting on things that might not be in our best interest.”

The fasting also develops self-control, Hashmi explained, as well as an appreciation for the things we take for granted, and that others may not be so fortunate to have.

“You become so accustomed to (the idea that) if you get hungry, you go over to the vending machine, you pop in a loonie, and you buy something and eat it; if you're thirsty, you turn on the tap – everything is so accessible,” said Hashmi.

“But to be able to appreciate what it must be like not having that is really profound if you actually go through it, especially if it's hot and you know you can't take a drink and you think about people in Africa and places where they experience much more heat, and are going on for longer days without any food or drink - it really gives you an appreciation of what they must be going through and it gives people motivation to do more to help out the needy.”

That sense of charity is also one of the main aspects of the month of Ramadan, Hashmi added, explaining that the amount Muslims are required to give to those less fortunate from their savings annually is often calculated and donated during the month.

And while the idea of abstaining from food, drink and intimacy with one's spouse during the daylight hours of summer might seem like more of a chore than a celebration, it is what takes place between the fasting and during religious rituals that makes Ramadan enjoyable for Muslims young and old alike.

When fasting is broken, Muslims first consume dates, as the prophet Mohammed did. This happens at sunset. The fast break is followed by sunset prayer. Then, each night, there is a predawn meal, where the community is invited to congregate in the Kingston Islamic Centre to join in the feast that will sustain them throughout the coming day. There is about three hours between sunset prayer and the predawn meal, during which the mandatory night time prayer takes place. During Ramadan, however, the night-time prayer is followed by recitation of the Qur'an from memory each night. By the end of the 30th day, the entire Qur'an has been recited.

Hashmi said that often he finds those from outside the Muslim faith have concerns about children or the elderly taking part in the fast. This is a concern that can be laid to rest, he explained.

Children are not required to fast, said Hashmi, though many children want to do so in order to participate in the momentous event with their family and friends. This, he explained, is a great time for those children to learn about fasting, why it is done, and what the religious significance is. Thus, instead of fasting entire, children will often participate in a sort of scaled down version of the observation of Ramadan.

“For example, my almost-five-year-old daughter was saying the other day 'I want to wake up, too, and I want to start fasting,' so I said 'You know what, maybe you don't need to get up early in the morning, but whenever you get up, you can have breakfast, and then maybe you can try to skip lunch, and then you can break the fast with us... or, if you get hungry a little earlier, you can break the fast then,’” Hashmi recalled with a soft laugh.

“It's not the real fast, but it's making it inclusive and giving them some opportunity to take part and experience a little bit of it as well.”

As for the elderly, as well as those who are ill, pregnant, or breastfeeding, there are ways to observe Ramadan without fasting during the long, hot summer days. Sometimes, people will postpone their fasting, Hashmi said, so that a mother who is breastfeeding can fast at a different time. This is also common for the elderly, who can opt to observe the fast in December when the days are shorter, thus being easier on the body.

If someone really shouldn't fast for health reasons, Hashmi said, they will often participate in charitable endeavours, or ensure they donate a meal daily to an organization or person in need.

"I emphasized last Friday that those with any health concerns or anyone taking medication should speak with their doctor about fasting," Hashmi said, noting that the idea is not to harm anyone or cause any health issues.

"I also speak about what foods are best to eat, and how to plan out your day so that you don't end up slacking at work, or getting dizzy and disoriented – it's all about finding the balance, as I said in my sermon last Friday, between work and worship."

What's most exciting and important to Hashmi is how much the event brings the Muslim community together. There are new people in the Islamic Centre and in the mosque each day, he said, and the centre holds activities on the weekends and at night, as well.

"So many people will come out who normally don't come to the mosque, and so the place will be packed, and you'll see all these new faces, and as an Imam I know, 'OK, this is my opportunity to connect with all these members of the community who don't come out,'" Hashmi expressed.

"It's good, because then, you know what, sometimes you see them afterwards as well, and you see the progression in peoples lives and that's really satisfying to me."

To find out more about the Ramadan schedule for the Islamic Society of Kingston, go to www.kingstonmuslims.net



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Well, "we" (I'm not a xian, but I'm white anglo), have Pancake Tuesday, and supposedly are supposed to give up some kind of food for Lent. Plus then all the Easter sugar-fest, bunny-fiesta, egg painting. They always make the "news".

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What they won't tell you: The irony is that after the last prayer of the day, they pig out like you wouldn't believe (the iftar). In fact, many of them GAIN weight during Ramadan, eating all kinds of dried fruit, nuts, etc.

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..and of course the smokers will go through a whole pack in a couple of hours seeing as they weren't allowed to smoke all day.

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Zatoon Anwar

Ramadan Mubarak to all Muslim Community!

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