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Inside Mecca

The Hajj, a spiritual journey to Mecca, is one of the largest pilgrimages in the world. Millions of Muslims of all different kinds walk together, sharing one spiritual goal, to become closer to God. With so many people flooding in at once, it is a massive organizational effort to make sure everyone can visit, and none are left behind. It is a time where the Meccan markets prepare, and pilgrims rest for the journey of their life — a chance for them to start clean on a new slate and become a better version of themselves.

The tradition of the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, is based on the story of Abraham. Abraham came to Mecca with his wife Hagar and his son Ishmael. When Abraham arrived, God ordered Abraham to abandon his wife and son in a desolate valley in what is known as today Mecca. Abraham followed God's orders but still came and visited them from time to time. However, on one of his visits, God ordered him to build up a Kaaba, meaning cube, and call the people to pilgrimage. The Kaaba symbolizes devotion to the one God, but after Abraham's passing, the site was dominated by idol worshipers. However, around the year 630, Muhammad cleared the Kaaba of idol worshipers and restored it to its original state. From then on, the Kaaba became the house of God for Muslims. It aswell became a place for those capable of pilgrimage to visit at least once in their lifetime.

However, the Hajj is more than just going and visiting the Kaaba. The journey consists of many sub rituals that prepare one for witnessing the house of God. When arriving at Mecca, the pilgrimage requires people to dress with two simple pieces of clothing. As well, women must cover their hair and make an effort not to expose themselves. The purpose behind this is to show that everyone rich or poor is equal. It is just there a soul on display with no materialistic wealth or glamour to cover it. They are exposed to God. Before visiting the Kaaba, people must travel to Arafat, the realm of forgiveness, or their pilgrimage will not count. It is said to be the place where Muhammad gave his final sermon in his last years of life. It is there people stay until the sun goes down, asking God for forgiveness. Afterward, people then practice the stoning of the three pillars, which symbolizes Abraham throwing three stones at satan before sacrificing his son to God. Right before Abraham makes the sacrifice, the Angel Gabriel came down and stopped him, congratulating him on his loyalty and then shows his son was a ram, which Abrahams promptly sacrifices to God. Through the ritual of Jamaat, people visit these pillars and throw 40-50 stones, reenacting the scene with Abraham. Throwing stones at the pillars symbolizes the cleansing of evil within them as well as the casting away of temptations and obsessions from one's life. Then through a show of humility, people cut their hair to show their new state of being. From this point, people are ready to walk into the Kaaba, the house of God. When arriving, they face the Kaaba and worship. They do not worship the object, but instead, its symbol of the one God. From there, they stand before God fully exposed, and worship to express their devotion and love towards him.

Many times when the pilgrimage comes to an end, it is an emotional period. It is a time where people leave a place they love and have always dreamed of visiting. It is marking the end

of a climactic spiritual journey that only happens once for a majority of people. Many may never see the Kaaba again in person. As a result, the final walking away marks the end of an incredible journey towards becoming a better person.