

Sauma Ramba:

A Journey Towards the

Light of Resurrection

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The season of Sauma Ramba (Lent/ Great Fast) is a journey towards the hope of Resurrection, commemorating the passion and death of Isho M'shiha. The seven weeks between the Season of Denha and the Feast of the Resurrection are known as 'Sauma Ramba' or the 'Great Fast'. The days of fasting and abstinence begin in a spirit of repentance and evaluation of our lives, after commemorating the departed on the last Friday of the Season of Denha. These are days of preparation to enter into the light of the Resurrection, by fighting against the powers of darkness, following the model of the forty days of fasting by Isho M'shiha, who defeated the enemy, satan, through prayer and fasting. The Season of Sauma Ramba is an invitation to purify ourselves through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, to wash away the stains of sin, and to live in a way pleasing to God. We profess this in the Holy Qurbana as well: "Let us appease M'shiha, His Father, and the Ruha d'Qudsha through fasting, prayer, and repentance". Before Isho fasted, the Ruha led Him into the desert (Luke 4:1). Fasting is not merely a human act; it is an occasion where the Ruha d'Qudsha leads us.

History of the Sauma Ramba

The Sauma Ramba developed through various stages starting from the first century. In the second century, a three-day fast was observed in preparation for the Feast of the Resurrection. By the third century, this became six days. During the first two centuries, the Feast of the Resurrection was celebrated every Sunday. However, it was from the fourth century onward that the forty day fast began in preparation for Easter. It is recorded that the Church of Jerusalem observed an eight week fast. The Council of Nicaea in AD 325 mandated the forty day fast in preparation for the Feast of the Resurrection.

The days of the Great Fast from the Sunday of Petrutha until Easter Sunday are known among Marthoma Christians as the 'Fifty Day Fast' (Anpathu Nombu). The Syriac word 'Petrutha' means 'to end' or 'to look back'. It reminds us that the days of celebration and worldly pleasures have ended, and the days of prayer and fasting have begun. According to ancient traditions, the days of Great Fast were not only days of penance but also a time for the renewal

of baptismal promises. It is a time to regain our pure love for God and His people, by purifying us through washing away our sins. In this period of repentance, believers would prepare for Baptism, and the Church traditionally administered Baptism on Great Saturday, just before Easter. St Jacob of Serugh describes repentance as a "Second Baptism".

Fasting in the Holy Scriptures

Numerous examples can be found in the Holy Scriptures of those who humbled themselves before God through fasting and prayer and found His favour. Moses fasted for forty days and received the Commandments (Exodus 24:18, 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:18). The Prophet Elijah, seeking refuge from Queen Jezebel, fasted for forty days and stayed safe at Horeb (1 Kings 19:8-9). When Ahab learned that punishment was coming for his sins, he humbled himself through fasting and averted God's wrath (1 Kings 21:27). Esther called for a three day fast to save the Jewish people from destruction (Esther 8:16). The inhabitants of Nineveh fasted and prayed together and were saved from God's anger (Jonah 3:5). Daniel fasted for three weeks, and his prayer was heard by God (Daniel 10:2). In the New Testament too, we see that the Apostles fasted and prayed (Acts 13:3, 14:23; 2 Corinthians 11:27).

Lent, Fasting, and Almsgiving: Perspectives of the Church Fathers

Mar Aprem teaches us that prayer and fasting are two wings given to us by God to fly toward Him. Fasting is not just abstaining from food; it is a spiritual weapon reflecting the victory of M'shiha over temptation. In the struggle against the evil one, fasting was a powerful weapon for the Lord. Mar Aprem reminds us that fasting and prayer are strong protective shields for us in the fight against the devil. The one who turned water into wine at Cana was not willing to turn stone into bread. While the first sin came from Adam's love for food, M'shiha

healed Adam's sin through His fasting. If the tempter led Adam to death through food, Isho turned fasting into a fortress of protection from that evil one. Mar Aprem points out that fasting teaches us humility and love, and it is the way to regain the 'Luminous Eye'. To understand the divine revelations hidden in Holy Scripture and nature, the 'Luminous Eye' or the 'Eye of Faith' is necessary.

Mar Aphrahat teaches us that prayer is a pure sacrifice and fasting is the weapon and shield of Christian life. Prayer is a pure sacrifice offered to God on the altar of the heart. "Whenever you pray, go into your room, shut the door and pray to your Father, who is in secret" (Matthew 6:6). Mar Aphrahat teaches us that the "room" is our heart and the "doors to be closed" are our lips. He reminds us that the greatest condition for our prayer to be acceptable to God is purity of heart. "Rend your heart and not your garments" (Joel 2:13). In the article on fasting, he emphasizes that "true fasting is to abstain from evil deeds, controlling anger, avoiding malicious talk, and maintaining purity of heart. Such fasting is superior and more pleasing to God than just abstaining from bread and water." Prayer with a pure conscience and a clean heart is true fasting itself. He gives examples from the Bible of those who fasted with purity of heart and faith. God accepted Abel's sacrifice because of his purity. Through Moses' obedience, God performed several miracles and saved the Israelites. At Joshua's word, the sun and moon stood still. Through Elijah's word, fire came down from heaven and the rains ceased. David's sins were forgiven through repentance. Daniel was saved from the lions' den.

The Prophet Isaiah reminds us of the fasting God desires: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice and to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your

house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" (Isaiah 58:6-7). Based on these words, Mar Aphrahat connects fasting with social justice and moral care. He teaches us that the one who gives to the poor from his hard work provides rest for the arms of God.

Mar Narsai states that fasting is a medicine to purify the mind and to heal the "paralysis" of worldly passions. Ascetic fasting is aimed at protecting the heart over the stomach. It is a power that gives spiritual discipline to the mind. In Mar Narsai's 'Memre', he speaks about the necessity of forgiveness. The fruit of a person's fasting depends on how they treat others. Holding malice in the mind destroys the virtues of the fast. For believers, there is only one enemy, satan. In light of the Holy Scripture, fasting is not a mere ritual; it is a preparation to receive the Bridegroom, M'shiha. He reminds us that, like the wise virgins, we must combine works of mercy with our fasting. The luxury of the rich led to spiritual destruction, be humble like Lazarus. Like the Prodigal Son, confess your mistakes and return to God the Father. This is the time to sow tears of repentance and prepare for the harvest to possess spiritual joy through Resurrection.

Reflections on Lent in the Eastern Liturgy

The prayers of the Liturgy of the Hours (Yama Prarthanakal) of the Season of the Great Fast clearly express the true spirit of fasting and penance. In these prayers, we see M'shiha as the Divine Physician who heals the disease of sin. We pray for grace

to remove malice and anger and to grow in purity of heart. The Liturgy of the Hours remind us that along with abstaining from food, we must turn away from evil and that we must be victorious over the evil one through fasting.

The 'Hudra' (the liturgical book containing the prayer cycle of the East Syriac Church) describes various dimensions of spiritual healing on the Sundays of Lent. The First Sunday reminds us to return to God and restore the divine relationship lost by our sins. On the Second Sunday, we reflect on M'shiha healing the leper, who also purifies our hearts from the illness of sin. On the Third Sunday we reflect on the healing of the paralytic and are encouraged to examine the spiritual paralysis that hinders our journey toward virtue. The Fourth Sunday teaches us to be persistent in prayer like the Canaanite woman and to place hope in universal salvation. The Fifth Sunday gives us the realization that the Lord, who healed the hunched woman, heals our "hunched" state caused by sin. The Sixth Sunday prepares the faithful for the light of the Resurrection by healing the spiritual blindness of our minds, just as the blind man received sight. This underscores that the Season of the Great Fast is not only a time of penance and repentance, but also an opportunity for spiritual healing.

Let us, during this Season of the Great Fast, which inspires us to be with God and lead us to deification (Theosis), purify our minds, show mercy to others, and travel in the path of the One who called us out of darkness into His light (1 Peter 2:9). ■