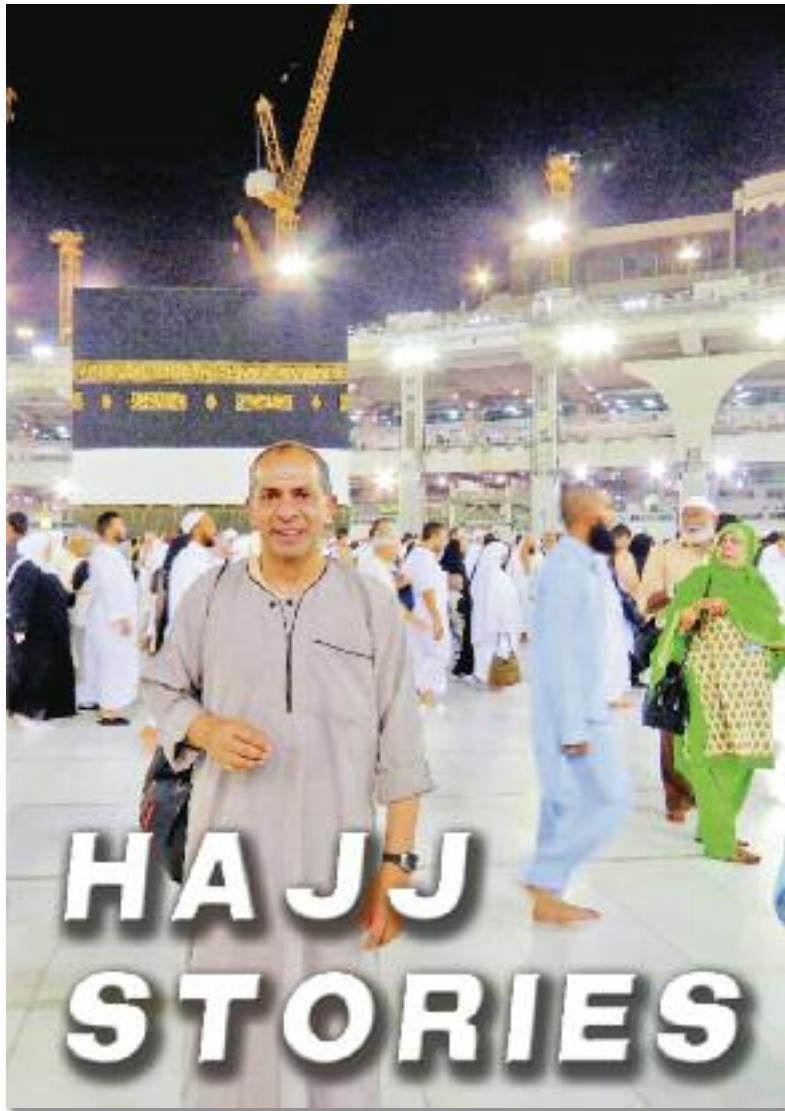


Waiting for forgiveness



His feisty wife was still silently fuming but at least there was no overt public display of disaffection, writes DR SALIM PARKER.

THE huge bear of a man towered over the nearly anorexic skeleton of his small wife. 'They're arguing again,' someone remarked.

We were all assembled in the huge breakfast buffet area of the five-star hotel in Makkah, about two weeks before Hajj. I feared that just by brushing lightly at her with his huge hands while she was ferociously shouting and gesticulating at him, he might cause serious bodily harm to her.

'Or rather, she is giving him hell again,' the commentator continued. I looked closer. Things are not always what we perceive them to be. We are so used to wives being abused that any scenario involving aggressive spousal interactions is automatically assumed to be driven by a male perpetrator.

When the scene is filled by the huge frame of a sumo-shaped husband, the perception is reinforced. As I walked closer to the couple, it became evident that the wife was indeed the aggressor and he was meekly shielding himself from her blows.

The imam who was sitting nearby, intervened and, after chatting to them, she cooled down after a while. The husband did not say much, just sat with a surrendering droop of the shoulders.

He happened to look up when I walked past their table. Strangely, there was no sunset in his eyes. True, there was no spring sparkle or mid-summer conflagration but definitely no dusking of the dawn.

It appeared that he was weathering a storm that would eventually lose its intensity, as if, though he was caught in an unpredictable rapid in the river of his life, he

would eventually reach calmer waters.

His feisty wife was still silently fuming but at least there was no overt public display of disaffection. In fourteen days' time we were all going to don our ihraams. All were going to be equal before their Creator.

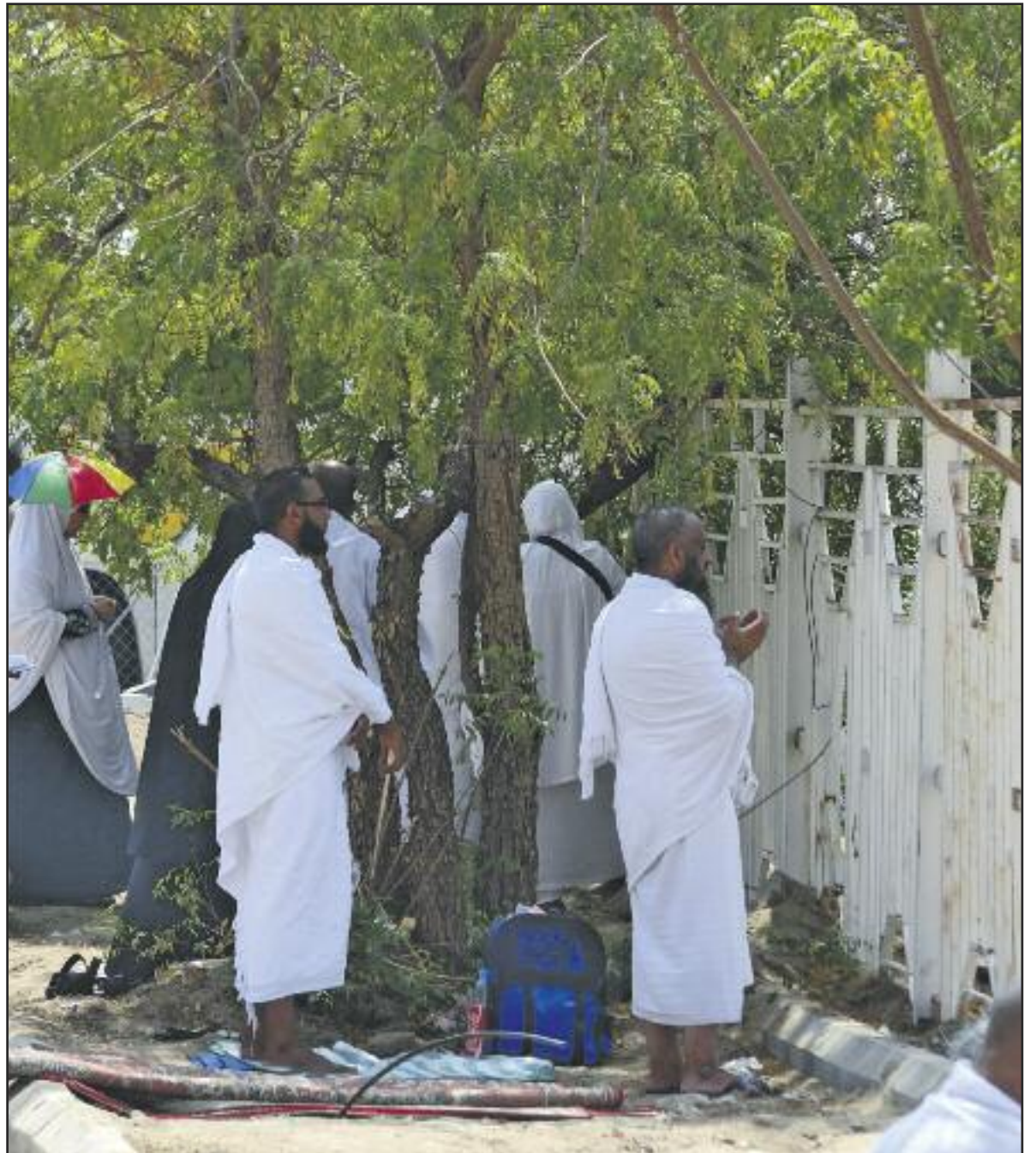
Here we had a couple who had most likely asked to be forgiven by all whom they had greeted but, clearly, one of them was not forgiving the other. He seemed prepared to wait.

The imam and I sat down for breakfast and he gave me a brief rundown of their story. Apparently, the man had, some time ago, transgressed in some way or the other. The imam did not elaborate as to the nature of this act and I did not pursue it either. It happened years ago, he had admitted his guilt and, according to the imam, has repented and tried to compensate in all ways possible.

My sense was that he had frittered away vast sums of her money but I could be wrong. She would not let him forget his error. In fact, as the years passed, she made it a point of reminding him about it and this would frequently be the subject of her public outbursts.

He was hoping that she would accept his apology, accept his attempts at compensation and move towards some form of reconciliation. He had saved especially for this Hajj as a further impetus but her pathological clinging to what clearly was providing her a moral sword over his head was not helping his desperate desire to resolve the matter.

The initial abuser was now being abused. We witnessed a few



Although some find it hard to forgive, on Arafah, Allah forgives more of His subjects than on any other day.

Photo SALIM PARKER

more such events over the next few days.

About a week before Hajj was due to commence, they came to see me in my consulting room, which was based in the hotel's basement. There were a number of quite sick people and I had not attended to them by the time the adhaan for the Dhuhr prayer was inviting us to the Haram.

By that time, there were about five patients that I still had to see to. I indicated to them that I would see to them immediately after the prayers and this was accepted as a matter of course. I would take a lunch break after I had assisted them.

Most of us by that time knew that we would never make it into the Holy Mosque when the compulsory prayer started. Makkah was full of prospective pilgrims and the streets leading to the mosque was filled at least thirty minutes before the adhaan sounded.

I normally make the prayer in the road just outside the hotel, being a mere speck among the nearly million pilgrims all grateful to be in the vicinity of the Holy Mosque, where prayers are considered to receive more reward than anywhere else on this planet.

I had a bathroom attached to my consultation room and all those there used the facility to perform ablution, readying ourselves for prayers. The imam happened to be sitting there as well and I rushed to get done.

The lady suddenly asked her husband to fetch her some juice from their hotel room. I politely offered her some from my well-stocked fridge but she declined. She wanted him to fetch it immediately while she waited.

The call for prayer could be heard and we had less than a minute to get out of the hotel and join the masses for the collective reward of the prayer. His eyes seemed dim, as if some light was fading. The imam was about to say something, probably a profound statement about the virtues of congregational prayer but was interrupted by the shrill shouting of the wife.

'My prayers come first,' the husband suddenly said. The wife had a shell-shocked appearance and it was evident that this must have been his first act of defiance ever. He joined us as we left the building, leaving his wife in my consulting room.

Outside, I could not ascertain whether it was the bright sunlight reflecting from his eyes or the warm glow of contentment of someone who was at peace with his inner self.

We prayed in the road, behind hundreds of thousands but all part of one large congregation.

It was quite hot and we rushed back immediately after prayers to the air-conditioned comfort of my rooms. She was not in the waiting area of my rooms but we could hear soft sobbing. We found her in the bathroom with tears rolling

down her eyes.

The imam asked them to join him and they found a secluded area with a couple of sofas while I saw to the few patients who still needed to be attended to and who, by now, had also returned from their prayers.

After about half-an-hour I was ready for them but I could see that they were in intimate discussion and waited, snacking on some fruit. It was a while later when they returned, with the imam bearing a satisfied smile.

Both had a couple of medical issues and our conversations revolved exclusively around those and Hajj. We did not allude to any of their well-known emotional issues. The wife seemed at ease, the sun emanating from her husband's eyes gently gazing upon her.

I did not see them again on the trip. There were probably no more public spats as I would surely have heard about it. Deep down, I was praying that they had resolved their issues and that they would reach Arafah in a spirit of forgiveness.

It is on Arafah that our Creator forgives more of His subjects than at any other place or any other time. We should strive to forgive all who have wronged us before we reach there, and immerse ourselves in the mercies of our Creator.

For more Hajj Stories visit www.hajjdoctor.co.za. You may contact Dr Parker via e-mail: salimparker@yahoo.com