

# The need to be on Arafah again



They had lost their second child a few minutes after the birth, writes DR SALIM PARKER.

THEY had performed their obligatory Hajj and were extremely grateful for having been the guests of Allah. Only our Creator knows whether it had been accepted but we all go on this journey knowing that Allah's mercy is infinite and, on the day of Wuqoof, standing at the peak of Hajj on Arafah, more of His subjects are forgiven than

on any other day.

We are often taught that to doubt such a divine gift would in itself be sinful and so, as long as repentance is sincere and the beseeching for forgiveness is from the heart, all of humanity present on that day on Arafah will flow from that vast plain as free of sin as a new-born child.

This couple lacked nothing as

far as worldly material was concerned: well-travelled, relatively good jobs and deeply religious. Their Hajj was immensely fulfilling and spiritually uplifting.

I was privileged to have treated their illnesses before the five days of Hajj and ensured that they would be at their prime medically and physically during, undoubtedly, the most important journey of their lives.

Hajj can be an incredibly taxing journey on the body and spirit. Somehow, this humbling exposure to the harsh desert, the humidity, the hellish heat, the crowds and the inevitable breakdown of transport infrastructure leads to the harnessing of a deeper, inner strength and resolve.

They experienced that and returned home as true ambassadors, echoing the call that Nabi Ibrahim (AS) first sounded thousands of years ago for all Muslims to undertake the Hajj once in their lifetime, if possible.

They had a beautiful son. They had lost their second child a few minutes after the birth. Even though they knew well in advance that their second gift would not survive outside the comforting nurture of the mother's womb, no amount of mental preparation can ever soften the devastating effect of seeing your child breathing the last breath in your arms just after adhaan and iqama were made in her ears, and just after her name was given.

They would forever remember a person, not just a baby, who had passed away after gracing the loving embrace of grateful parents. They accepted what their Creator had destined for them. Yet, there was something that they desired, that they felt that they still needed to do.

They needed their own form of closure, their acceptance. They needed to be back on Arafah, back amongst the millions converging from all corners of seemingly different countries and nationalities

unifying in their ihraams to stand at the time of Wuqoof.

There were multiple obstacles in their way, though. South Africa is only allowed a certain number of pilgrims annually. The rules allow for applications every five years. The reality was that the waiting list plus those who had never gone for Hajj before, and were added to every year, would shift them down lower on the list.

They knew that they could not take the place of those on whom Hajj was obligatory, and would never deprive anyone by taking their places. They were also aware that our Prophet (SAW) had performed Hajj only once. Yet, the desire to perform Hajj again was intense and they explored all other avenues.

They performed a very fulfilling Umrah but it did not have the dhikr on Mina, the standing with outstretched hands on Arafah, the wonderful rest on the hard surfaces of Musdalifah or the symbolic pelting at the jamaraat.

There was no way that they could go with the official South African quota that year as only two thousand had been accredited and twenty thousand were on the waiting list. They went to the embassy and asked how they could be assisted.

The Saudi officials there could not fathom why people would want to repeat an obligation that was mandatory only once. They were asked to write a letter explaining why they wanted to go, and heard nothing for a while. But they persisted.

Initially, they were advised to use a certain company but this turned out to be a dead end. They would gently enquire about any progress or any news but this was not easily forthcoming. They, however, remained positive and continued their prayers every day for their dream and wish to be realised.

'Stick to the truth,' I recall advising them. There is nothing more

touching than the truth. Truth elicits kindness, the kindness that, in an adaptation of an old phrase, elicits compassion that lets the deaf hear and the blind see.

I know of cases where people have approached the officials pleading that they want to perform Hajj and who swore that they had never been to the Hijaz when a cursory inspection of their passports revealed two Hajj visas. This led to marked scepticism but, as always, the truth prevails.

They received news, literally about a week before Hajj was to commence that they had been granted courtesy Hajj visas, and at last their dream was to come true. It was not the end of their uphill battle though but they were prepared to face all obstacles.

Finding accommodation so late proved difficult. They were prepared to stay anywhere but even that took some effort. Communication and service issues with their agent led to an agonisingly long journey from Jeddah airport to their decidedly basic apartment in Makkah.

The intolerable heat and waiting in ihraam with the prospect of an Umrah so close in distance but yet so far away in time would have frustrated most. But they were young, they were patient and they were set on their mission.

Late that evening, after their Umrah, I had the pleasure of meeting the couple who exuded immense appreciation for the calling that they were about to answer.

I met them on Arafah again. It always amazes me that, no matter how busy we are as doctors attending to the sick, no matter how many other matters demand our attention, we always meet those who seem to entrench their enthusiasm and spirituality on our minds.

He was in tears when we greeted but his silence spoke volumes of what was going through his mind. I have often on Arafah been blessed to be in the presence of those who said absolutely nothing but yet conveyed everything – a son kissing his mother's hand, a daughter hugging her cold and distant father for the first time in decades, the tender wiping of tears by a husband from the cheeks of his wife. No words are spoken but the messages of love, affection and compassion reverberate.

Way too soon the day was over and the sun started to set. There was always that one more prayer, one more humble request, one more atonement that had to be taken care of. We, along with millions others, started flowing from the vast plain of Arafah towards Musdalifah, praying that all our previous transgressions were in the past and that we would, Allah willing, never repeat them.

They walked with the group that I was leading. As we walked past Jabal Rahmah, the Mount of Mercy, I knew exactly what they were feeling and thinking for with each step that we took away from the foot of that mountain, the force that attracts one there in the first place was intensifying.

Labbaik!

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With each step taken away from Arafah, the desire to one day return intensifies. Photo SALIM PARKER

