

# Hajj Stories

## Postponing Virtual Hajj

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### Dr Salim Parker

Hajj 2020 is over. Some close to me kept themselves busy. My Imam, who was supposed to have set off for his half century of standing at the time of Wuqoof on Arafat, had to stay in isolation at home as his youthful eighty years increased his susceptibility to the prevailing coronavirus pandemic. A close friend lamented that he would also be at home instead of his twenty fifth trip. Let me hasten to add that it's not about numbers. No! It is the soul, though deeply appreciative of having been gifted a compulsory sojourn to the Holy Land, acquiring an unquenchable thirst to return again and again to savour each drop of divine nectar it can extract when being as close to our Creator as being earthly possible. Some go as spiritual guides, others as assistants in whatever way possible even if it means loading pilgrims' bags onto the roof of their bus. I have seen Imams fixing windows and unclogging drains in Hujaajs' rooms and doctors carrying pilgrims' grocery bags. All to make the life of sometimes bewildered and sometimes demanding travelers lives easier.

It is about being there, walking in the footsteps of giants. Giants

who teach us everything about living as Muslims. It is always said that Hajj is Arafat. It is on Arafat where our beloved Prophet (SAW) delivered his last sermon. Where he said that there is absolute equality between all of mankind and that colour, race, status, education or wealth is no measure of our worth as far as our Creator is concerned. We all don our uniform Ihrams on Hajj where nothing distinguishes one believer from the other. We stand as one united Ummah on the vast plains at the time of Wuqoof, the most important day in the life of any Muslim. We all, shrouded, in dust, thereafter spend some time on Musdalifah where we share the same stars illuminating our life ahead whilst we are all level with the soil that our forefathers rested on. We face and repel the same devils our ancestors had to deal with when we pelt the Jamaraats.

As we travel through the journey, we give and receive without question and without hesitation. The Prophet (SAW) emphasized the value of charity whether compulsory or additional, and being of assistance to others, and this comes to the forefront during Hajj. Whether

unselfishly departing with thousands of rands to buy wheel-chairs for some injured Hujaaj, paying for taxis and sometimes even buses to transport a whole group, the five days of pilgrimage has seen extraordinary acts of generosity. It comes in all forms, from pushing a wheel-chair, fetching food for and feeding the sick, shading an older person with an umbrella whilst that pilgrim is standing outside, hands raised and reaching out to his Creator.

Our Prophet (SAW) also reiterated the reverence women should be showered with during his final sermon. Hajj delivers the ultimate message to all misogynists. All males, whether kings or paupers, have to obey one of the rites of Hajj and retrace the hurried paces of a black slave lady who desperately traversed two hillocks seven times until Allah rewarded her unshaken faith by sprouting the nourishing Zamzam spring so that she could quench the thirst of her crying son. Today we all slavishly follow suit when we perform the Sa'ee, one of the essentials of Hajj. We fulfill an injunction that has infinite wisdom associated with it. Gender rights are entrenched to be a mutually respectful two-way process with both having rights over each other.



A surreal Hajj took place in 2020  
(Photo: The Guardian)

The COVID-19 pandemic created havoc in all aspect of life. It was not merely a medical pandemic, it extended its tentacles into every fabric of society, the economy, education, the way we live, work and pray, and our interactions with our loved ones. Hunger looms and poverty is evident everywhere. Some nightmarish decisions had to be

taken. Do schools close and protect vulnerable teachers as well as prevent children from transmitting the virus to the elderly at their homes? Sounds reasonable, except that a large number of children obtain their only nourishing meal for a day at school and would starve if they had to stay at home. These vexatious issues are endlessly and heatedly debated and has led to acrimonious exchanges. What is evident is that even if you cut off a number of this hydra's heads, many others seem to manifest.

### 'The COVID-19 pandemic created havoc in all aspect of life '

There were many noble attempts to reenact via the virtual realms the whole physical and spiritual journey. Those who were on Hajj before could easily identify with most of these genuine illuminations of what transpires during Hajj. We could see the Tawaaf around the Kaba'a, the movements between Safaa and Marwa, the first day on Mina, the standing at Quqoof on Arafat and the pelting of the Jamarats. We could view pilgrims cutting their hair as well as the slaughtering of the sacrificial sheep at the designated abattoirs. It was strange to observe pilgrims being regulated like kindergarten attendees. Of course it was nec-

But there was no way that those who were all set to embark on this journey but had it cruelly postponed by the suspension of international flights could ever get deep insight into what incredible and life altering experience awaited them. For us Hajj starts on the day the Nieyah was made and accreditation accepted. It is in the sharing the joy of the awaiting journey with family and friends where the fire is stoked even more. It is going to classes, reading more and more and realizing that the more you

learn the less you really know that the desire conflagrates. Then the greetings, the well-wishing and advice by well-intentioned previous travelers. There are the decisions of who to travel with, how long the journey can be within work and social constraints, and what type of packages can be considered. And all this whilst not having left the shores of our country yet!

Hajj is Arafat. Hajj is fixed in time, place, sequence of rites and in the hearts and souls of those physically present. The live screening was a reminiscence for those who have been there. It may slightly give an inkling for those that have previously never been able to accept the invitation as to what to expect. But can it induce the same shudder experienced by those standing with outstretched hand at the time of Wuqoof on Arafat? Can it replicate the spiritual ecstasy experienced by those setting out away from those vast plains that same evening despite being in a disheveled physical state? The welcoming smell of the bare earth as you float into the best sleep you would ever have on Musdalifah? The answer is an unequivocal no. Hajj has to be lived physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. You have to be physically present to be able to say 'Labaik!' You have to be there in order to say: 'Oh My Lord, I am Here.'

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