

# Hajj Stories

## When the light is clouded

April 2021

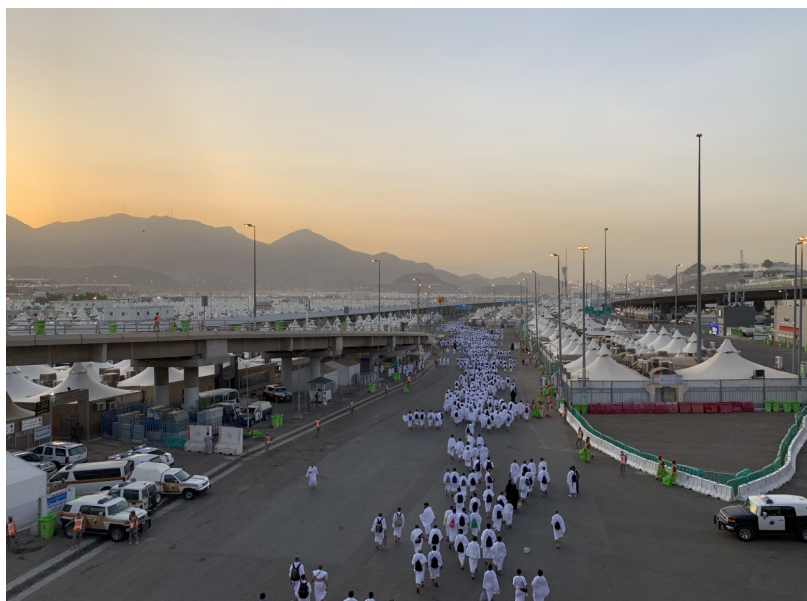


### Dr Salim Parker

I was livid. An all-knowing social media troll commented about a Muslim lady who committed suicide and how the wrath of her Creator would be unleashed upon her. The evil of unsolicited posts was again brought to the forefront as the self-appointed expert's views were devoid of background knowledge of the person, as well as having no insight into the medical and religious insight of the cause of it. Severe depression is a frightening presence in the lives of many individuals and their families. In an extreme case the sufferer is so sleep deprived that the very thought of waking up after a medication induced daze and then experiencing an even more severe repeat cycle is enough to glance at an eternal slumber. The depths of dark despair and hopelessness at the very bottom of a deep abyss devoid of light and unscalable escape sheer rising walls affects the will and soul in unimaginable ways.

It reminded me that depression can manifest on even the most spiritually joyous of occasions. Years ago, whilst in Makkah one of the South African Hajj agents asked my assistance. One of the pilgrims in his group was very upset and was threatening to jump out of the window of his

hotel room. 'He is still in Ihram and he wants to end it all; I don't understand him,' the agent said. 'He has just arrived from the Madinah the City of Peace. We are not even one hundred meters away from the Kaba'a and he must still perform his Umrah. Everyone else is ecstatic to be in



Sometimes even the sunrise is unseen

here with Hajj about three weeks away. I just don't understand what his problem is,' he continued. The affected pilgrim was part of a group of more than a hundred and the agent had his hands full trying to sort out rooms and matching a disproportionate number of luggage pieces

to their anxiously waiting owners.

It was clear as to what bothered the pilgrim. He was well travelled and though this was his first Hajj, he had been to Saudi Arabia for Umrah previously. The previous travels were absolute treasure pearls, with five star hotels and smoothly flowing arrangement. They were also in the low seasons when the crowds were much smaller. With Umrah the traveller is mostly in control of his destiny. With Hajj the procedures are completely different. Tailor made packages are difficult and most Hujjaaj have to choose a fixed package that is as closely aligned with their requirements and budget. That was already a headache for him as he had to sort out all his business issues at home first. There was a delay in the issuance of their tickets and the irritating discovery that the date of departure was changed by a day. It does not sound like a major issue, but for someone who printed his greetings cards already, arranged for an Imam to be at his home at an appointed time as well as arranged meals for visitors, it was a major irritation.

He was suffering from major depression before his journey and even though he was using

settle down at the airport, they are disenfranchised by having their passports taken away. When on Arafat we are all equal, anonymous and harmonious. At Wuqoof we are individual hearts yet our hearts beat as one single soul. There we have our unique individuality in the sea of collective, willing and submissive con-

### "Depression can manifest on even the most spiritually joyous of occasions"

formity. That is a far cry from sitting at an airport often for hours herded like cattle and at the mercy of officials who at times are completely uncooperative. Sometimes the journey from Cape Town to Jeddah is shorter than the following local leg in Saudi Arabia. This exacerbates the anxiety and depressions of the already susceptible.

When the particular pilgrim reached Makkah after an already stressful stay in Madinah, he expected to be in a particular hotel which he was familiar with. Somehow arrangements and communication got mixed up and he was placed in accommodation with standards way below to what he paid for, expected and was promised. What worsened matters was that the rooms were not of the same size and standard. This resulted in some getting suites whilst he was assigned an insect infested hovel. This was despite everyone paying the same price for a room at that particular hotel, the one where he was not supposed to have been placed in the first place. When he brought this gross inadequacy to the attention of the agent, the latter seemed totally surprised and said he would attend to it after the Umrah. He then rushed off to attend to other pressing issues.

By now his depression had delved below depths he dipped into before. Everything seemed to be going wrong for him, he felt ignored and helpless in a foreign country with little hope of some gentle sunshine soon to embrace him. 'It's dark to the left, its darker to the right, there is no light above and below is a cesspool of despair. The words of others are empty and their apathy is claustrophobic. When I look at the tall buildings they seem to distort and threaten to

collapse on me. Now I just really wish they would and crush me so that my remains are lost within all that rubble.' He said at one stage. In his words were the answer as well. Yes, he needed some adjustment to his medication. Of course he needed to be counselled. But what he most needed was to be listened to. He

did not need to be patronized or be approached with a condescending attitude.

His hotel was changed and he was provided with the room that he contractually paid for. His mood improved somewhat and within a few days there was no more the wish to depart. Rather there was an increasing desire to be part of all activities, to get ready for the greatest day in the life of any Muslim. He did not exhibit the same unbounded enthusiasm that some of our more extroverts displayed. For him Arafat was still a debt to repay to our Creator. But now there was also the realization that our Duas may be accepted and that our sins may be forgiven if we are sincere in our intentions. He was removing blankets layer by layer that were suffocating him as the five days of Hajj dawned.

He was not very vocal on Arafat but made some telling comments. 'It is the depression that kills you, not the jumping out of high window thirty floors above the ground,' he remarked. We as a society need to reflect on not so much at a deed but what led to the commitment of the deed. Whenever we want to comment on a suicidal person's actions and intentions let us ask ourselves what we did to assist the person. Also at that time we should ask ourselves that if we were standing on Arafat would our Creator have forgiven us for posting disparaging comments about someone we never knew. Allah knows best.

salimparker@yahoo.com