

Hajj Stories

The Perfect Time

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‘I received a message. It is the most important one that I could ever have received.’ He was crying. Short and lean in stature, he was typical of the group he represented. They travelled in large numbers and had a dominant leader whose word was law. Nearly as prominent was the religious scholar who decided what, where and how religious activities were to be engaged in. To compare it with military discipline would be a bit unfair but there was a certain reliability coupled with some rigidity that was a comfort for some. It was difficult to get lost in such a group, and even more unlikely that any of the essentials of the pilgrimage would not have been properly adhered to. The individual wanderer who wanted to follow his own path, who wanted to sit a bit longer in front of the Kab’aa when the command came to leave would have had some difficulty to adapting to the rigours of conformity. However, it suited him perfectly.

We were all in Aziziya just outside Makkah. The first day of Hajj was about a week away and I was part of a group of South Africans who were residing in a building situated very close to a

number of hotels housing Indian pilgrims. We were South Africans, they were Indians living next to Libyans, Iranians and Iraqis but in reality, we were all simply Hujaaj soon to be part of the greatest unifying congregation on this earth. Where and when else do we find so many



Everyone has their own unique story

different and disparate individuals homogenizing as one collective body other than on Arafat? That is the day when all Muslims have one singular and common purpose and mission which is to connect with their Creator. It is the one day and unique location when all Muslims present are closer to their Allah and to be

forgiven of their sins than any other time or place.

I was running a medical clinic in the South African building and he somehow heard of the service that we run. As a rule, we never turn away anyone who needs medical assistance and he was my last patient before Thuhr. After attending to his medical problems, we went for the midday prayers and I thereafter invited him to join me for lunch. He dutifully phoned his group leader that he would not be attending their communal meal and joined me in my rooms where we started chatting during our light meal. His background was intriguing in that he originally hailed from a part of India where my parents were born which I visited frequently in my youth. His command of English was good, and he spoke easily, even though it was evident that it was not his mother tongue. I spoke about how the district has changed from being rural with poor electricity supplies to being modern with good infrastructure and still with inconsistent electricity due to load shedding. To my surprise he confessed that he was not in that village for decades. ‘I was told to leave and never come back,’ he remarked sadly.

He was an average achiever at school. Never excelling but neither failing at anything was a hallmark of his school career. He got married soon after finishing school and found employment as a clerk at some government institution. He was content with

working, spending evenings with his family and going on holiday for a week once a year. His wife was from a much more ambitious family and she studied part time soon achieving a number of academic credits. Her family was much wealthier than his and her father was a powerful figure in their village. There was a

‘He longed for his own children even though others filled their places’

clear disparity between his humble requirements and their aspirations. According to him he encouraged his wife to study but the more she achieved academically, the more she considered him unworthy of her and her family. He would see to their two small children whilst she burned the midnight oil. Their village life was heading for a crisis.

Whenever there were conferences that his wife presented at, he was shunned and her family went with her. Soon her family decided that the two children would be seen to by her family. He often returned home from work to an empty house with his wife away and their children with the maternal family. The children were three and five years old when things came to a head. After a heated family fracas, he was told in no uncertain terms that he had to leave. Not just the village or his wife, but also his children. This was nearly forty years ago, his wife’s family had the whole village, law enforcement agency, his employer and even his friends on their side. He had to not attempt to make any contact with any one and start a new life somewhere else. He fled to a city far to the north.

He found work as a driver for a wealthy family and was still currently employed by them. They considered him to be part of the family and nothing happened without his involvement. His requirements were minimal he had his own sleeping quarters and received an adequate salary which he mostly saved as all his usual daily needs were covered. The joy of the birth of their children was shared with him and he

was instrumental in their rearing right up till when they got married. These children offspring were also a joy to him.

All this time he tried finding out about his very own children. Initially he wrote letters and this resulted in the police apprehend-

ing and threatening him, clearly at the instigation of his ex-wife’s family. Forty years ago telephones were erratic and his initial attempts to call were unsuccessful. His wife and family moved from the village and settled overseas and he lost complete contact with them. He maintained his simple life and some would say that he lacked any ambition but the reality was that he was content with the little that he had. He has a secure job, a good, homely environment and people that appreciated him and allowed him to be himself. He just did not have his own family. And he longed for his own children even though others filled their places.

After lunch we parted ways, but he came to see me a day later for a follow-up visit. He was not very tech savvy but others in his group were. When they heard his story, they unbeknown to him explored Google search and other modalities such as Facebook and soon they could identify someone who could contact one of his children. Each pilgrim in recent times is provided with their own mobile Saudi number and this particular son was provided with his father’s Saudi contact number. He was in my room when he received a message which simply stated that his son wanted to call him and what would be the best time.

‘I received a message. It is the most important one that I could ever have received.’ He was crying. Arafat was a few days away. He was going to be blessed with contact with his family after about forty years. His Hajj was simply going to be complete in a few days’ time. Allahu-Akbar!

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