

Hajj Stories

Stranger Living in My Heart

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I was told about the couple before I arrived in Saudi. ‘He is such a nice guy but his wife really has an odd personality,’ I was forewarned. They were one of the first to arrive in the Holy Lands for their obligatory Hajj and her strange behaviour was noticed by many of their group’s fellow pilgrims. She was never disruptive or rude and certainly did not make any enemies. She however did not make any friends and what was noticeable was her affect which was distant and indifferent. This was interspersed with inappropriate outbursts of mostly verbal but on the odd occasion physical utterances and activities. Nothing profound, yet distinct oddities were noted. When the talk around the breakfast table was about what juices were available, she would comment about the Hajj classes she attended in Cape Town. When their bus transporting them from Madinah to Makkah was delayed, she disappeared and was later found in the Prophet’s (SAW) Mosque after a frantic search. ‘I’ll rather sit in the Haram than in the hotel’s lobby,’ was her wry comment.

Their group was already in Saudi Arabia for three weeks when I reached Makkah. Arriving at the hotel is always accompanied by

flurry of activity. Being in Ihram, there is always the intense desire to complete the Umrah. It does not matter how many times a person has performed Hajj or



No one is a stranger to their Creator

Umrah, each additional gift of setting sight on the Kaba’a when entering the Haram, clad only in Ihram, is a deeply uplifting reawakening. We mere mortals can only benefit from being honoured another visit and always feel immensely appreciative of our fortunes. However, wanting to embark on the journey from the hotel to the Haram a mere hundred steps away has to be tempered with responsibilities. There was the rare occasion

when a fellow pilgrim who has been in Makkah a few weeks already would insist that I supply him with painkillers even though it was evident that I was accompanying my just arrived group for Umrah. Some other times I had to attend to a patient as soon as I stepped off the bus. This was one such occasion.

I was told that she was in her room suffering from severe headaches. She had been to the hospital and given analgesics but the pain intensity has increased despite her using the prescribed potent medication. Her husband escorted me to their room. One of the most uncomfortable issues for me during the days of Hajj is to examine patients whilst we all in Ihram as I certainly am not used to it despite doing it for two decades. Now in their room a few weeks before Hajj, disheveled and sweaty after a grueling fifteen hour bus ride, I was not exactly the white coat paragon of medical assistance she expected. ‘Are you a doctor?’ she asked rather bluntly. Her husband tried to explain to her my supposed expertise and she rather reluctantly agreed for me to pose a few questions and thereafter to

examine her. It turned out to be quite revealing.

A few questions and a basic examination revealed no serious and threatening conditions. She had been suffering from these incapacitating headaches for a few years and certain medications, which she did not have, but which luckily I always carry in my emergency bag, tended to alleviate the problem. I gently enquired a bit more in her history as it is unusual to start getting

severe headaches in middle age. ‘Oh, it started after her car accident Doc. In fact, everything started after the accident,’ her husband informed me. I gave her the required medication and her husband walked with me to my room. I asked him about the ac-

‘On Hajj there is no stranger to Allah except the one who does not reach out.’

cident and he indicated that it was quite a severe one when she, driving alone, was involved in a multi-car pile-up. She was hospitalized for a few weeks and though brain scans did not show significant damage, the headaches were a result of the trauma. ‘Her personality also changed Doc. Most of the time she is the person I married but there are times when she is really just a complete stranger. Right now, she is a stranger living deep in my heart,’ he said with tears welling in his eyes.

He described how the past few years had been spent visiting one psychiatrist after another. She was not a danger to herself or others, she could put in a day’s work and function in familiar places without any overtly

strange behaviour, until there is a single out of place remark or gesture. ‘But there has been one constant feature of her before and after the accident,’ he said. ‘It is her intense desire to perform Hajj. After the accident, she seems her complete normal self when we talked about performing our obligatory journey. We could plan and discuss the journey, the rituals,

the classes and how we would stand on Arafat. During these times she would be my soulmate, the person I want to spend the rest of my life with and the person with whom I want to stand on Arafat at the time of Wuqoof. Then when we have to face the routine and mundane routines of life, she would at times again be a stranger living in my heart,’ he added.

He worked fervently to secure the funds for the journey and

their relationship grew stronger as long as the focus was on Hajj. For the two of them the first few weeks in Saudi Arabia was absolute bliss. It became evident that her apparent inappropriate remarks only came to the forefront when the conversations were

about trivial issues. She would partake in all the religious activities of the group and though she was mostly a background and invisible participant, she did contribute meaningfully at times. This I all learnt as I walked to my room. ‘I am going to have a quick shower and then join the group that just arrived for Umrah,’ I said. ‘If your wife is agreeable, why don’t the two of you join us for the Tawaaf?’ He replied that he’ll ask her.

As I expected, they were in the foyer when our group readied ourselves for the minor pilgrimage. There was no glimpse of any headache, just excitement and absolute focus. She was really living her Hajj even though it was a few weeks away. After our Umrah was completed they waited for me at the hotel. I told them of the one absolute of my daily activities. No matter how busy or tired I was, I performed one Tawaaf every day when in Makkah. This seemed to give them some purpose. They were advised to avoid the scorching midday heat and not go to the Haram for certain prayers and I indicated how to get in and out without breaking into a sweat.

All she needed was affirmation and constant association with their purpose on Hajj. The fellow pilgrims soon learnt to steer away from gossip and irrelevant issues and unearthed a real treasure of a human being. Some even realised that her focus refocused their journeys. Weeks later I saw the couple on Hajj during the time of Wuqoof. I saw no strangers. Instead I saw two physical bodies united in their hearts. They were connected with their Creator. On Hajj there is no stranger to Allah except the one who does not reach out.

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