

# Hajj Stories

## Opening Doors

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### Dr Salim Parker

The first day of Hajj was seven days away. I arrived quite late in Saudi Arabia that year and had just finished my Umrah. I proceeded to make my way to a friend's hotel room very close by, had a shower and was ready to join my group in who had moved that same day to Aziziyah on the outskirts of Makkah. Everyone in the group had already moved to Aziziyah by then. The prices in the Makkah hotels increase by more than ten times a few days prior to Hajj and it made economic sense to move. It also made practical sense as Mina, where most of the Hajj time was to be spent, was within walking distance from the Aziziyah apartments. These apartments were minimally furnished and pilgrims are always warned that, in preparation for Hajj, their accommodation was going to descend from the dizzying five star heights of the initial hotels, to the zero stars that was what they were faced now with.

I was to share a room with three other pilgrims and made my way to the building with a small suitcase, my medicine bag and a large box of medicines. It was customary to not lock the rooms in these buildings as every Hajj had a different routine and even giving each one a key would

have led to someone leaving their key in the room when they left and another occupant locking up later. All pilgrims normally locked their suitcases, but the room door was always unlocked. I greeted a number of the pilgrims who had congregated in the communal ground floor and got involved in a few unintended consultations as well. Two of them offered to help me carry my luggage to the second floor and I gladly accepted the offer. We made our way up and, once in front of my room, I knocked, greeted loudly and turned the doorknob. It was locked.

We heard movement inside the room and knocked again. Someone unlocked the door, opened it and invited us in. He was alone. He returned to his bed, picked up his Quran and softly started reciting, seemingly oblivious of the new intrusion into their space. There were suitcases under three of the beds and I automatically gravitated to the last one. My companions left and I tried conversing with him, but his responses were mostly in monosyllables. Over the next few hours, the other two occupants returned, and we affably engaged, but he was quite disinterested and even though all three of us would extend questions that we were de-

bating to him, he mostly ignored them. What was evident was that he requested that if anyone left the room, he either asked one of the others to lock the room or would do it himself.

Later that evening he went to a shop. Alone. He did not ask if anyone needed anything that he could get for them. 'I understand that he is a loner but him locking the door even if all of us are in the room is frustrating,' one of the roommates sighed. 'He is

travelling on their own and really tried to do as much good as possible. And they were determined that he would be an integral part of the closely knit family that the group was becoming. When one pilgrim's family member passed away in South Africa, we all collectively prayed and felt the pain. When it became known that an eighty-year-old in the group loved pomegranates, the sweetest fruit of paradise was somehow sourced.

To his credit he tried. He tolerated my crazy and unpredictable schedule and soon promoted himself to an unofficial receptionist and assistant within a few days. He was less responsive to other pilgrims but struck a up a very good friendship with the other two roommates. He was the first to notice that despite my erratic schedule I was always not around for about two hours every night. Two nights before Hajj as I was preparing to leave the

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physically, emotionally and psychologically locked up,' he added. Just then he walked in. I told him that as a doctor my phone may ring at any time or there could be a knock on the door when someone is looking for me.

He came to see me for some medical problem and without real prompting revealed details of his traumatic childhood and being moved from one foster home to another. 'I was always placed with a family but never had family,' he said sadly. He

room with my small pack back, the three asked me if I need company. I told them that I make a Tawaaf every evening on the roof of the Haram, that being my time with my Creator. 'May we join you?' he asked. 'Of course,'



Mina and Arafat have boundaries, Allah's mercies do not.

'I must have an open-door policy as I am here to serve the pilgrims but of course I'll make every attempt not to disturb you three,' I said and indicated that I would have a consulting room on the ground floor. They all indicated that they were fine with that.

'Come with me,' I said. I know where the best ice cream is to be found and it's on me.' The two jumped up immediately. He was hesitant but my gentle, though firm, persistence swayed him. He spoke very little but it was evident that he enjoyed himself. 'Try to involve him in everything you do,' I told the other two. 'We have to accept that he lives behind closed doors and that he will not open it himself. We have to remove his barriers.' They were two inherently good men

spoke in depth of his reclusiveness, of his reluctance to trust and his fear that forming close bonds will just be shattered sooner or later. I explained to him that it is going to be difficult to overcome these negative feelings. However, the essence and spirit of Hajj, with its accompanying mercies, was a good time to start to accept that most people are inherently good. 'Allah forgives more of his subjects on the Day of Wuqoof than at any other time. Why do we not leave the hurt inflicted on us by others in the past in the past?' I prodded. 'I know it is not easy for you to initiate engagements with others but try to respond to those who reach out to you. You may find more decadent ice-cream flavours,' I smiled.

I replied. But as fate would have it, I was called to attend to an emergency. However, another worker was on his way to Makkah and readily offered to accompany them.

Within a week the three of them became inseparable with me being the occasional welcomed intruder. On Mina and Arafat they had their own small prayer sessions within the larger group gatherings. The four of us were part of a group that walked from Arafat to Musdalifah. He had by now opened up all the borders that life had thrust around him. He was ready to open doors for others to enter through. He was also stepping out through now discarded barriers. Labaik! He has arrived.

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