

HAJJ STORIES

DELAYING HAJJ

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'He'll never stand on Arafat. He had the opportunity, and on a number of occasions was asked, in fact even begged, to perform Hajj. He was a good person who performed all his daily prayers and was known in the community to be an extremely generous person. He always said that the more generous a person is the more abundant is Allah's reward. He fasted virtually every Monday and Thursday. Doc, we have five pillars in Islam and my father's dedication and adherence to the first four was more than hundred percent. He just never thought of performing Hajj. He had the money, the health,

"He is here, he is with you with every step that you take."

and the time to embark on the journey but somehow always used the premise that his vast business networks needed his presence. He could not explain why the businesses survived when he went on his annual overseas trips.' The young man spoke as we walked from Arafat to Musdalifah.

He spoke with immense sadness. 'My mother was urging him for years to perform Hajj and she started to get impatient as they were not getting younger anymore,' he said. We were part of a large group who, with millions of other Hujjaaj, descended from the high plains of Arafat in our, by now disheveled, Ihrams and physical appearances. Our minds and spiritual states in contrast were highly ordered and focused on reciting 'Labaik!' I was one of the group guides and made my way up and down the file of pilgrims. The motivations and inspirations derived from the talks by the Ulema on Arafat was visibly still illuminating the souls of all. There was incredible positivity, deep appreciation that we were all blessed to have been able to stand together at the time of Wuqoof. He was the exception. Even though he was physically walking with us, he was clearly detached from the rest of the group.

He walked with his eyes fixed on the ground and seldom made eye contact with anyone. His shoulders were drooped and the relatively light pack back he was carrying appeared to mountain him down. Pilgrims are frequently overcome by emotions but he was clearly different. Whilst others had excitement, contentment and joy walking along, he had sadness and melancholy flanking him. The tears of others were tears of happiness; his was of sorrow. He had consulted me the day before Hajj started about some medical condition whilst we were still in our hotel in Makkah's Azizyah suburb, and the interaction was uneventful as far as I could recall. He had cordial social interactions with everyone and no one in our group noticed anything untoward. He was one of the last pilgrims to have arrived in Saudi Arabia so very few in the group actually got to know him.

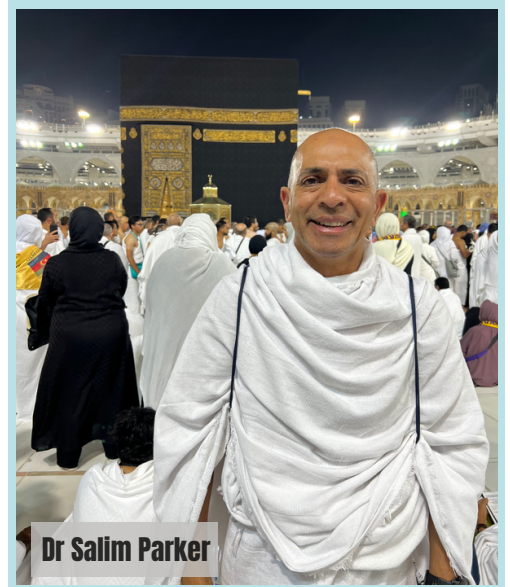
It was the tears that led me to ask him if I could assist him in any way possible. He was young and healthy and was carrying a very light bag that probably only contained the bare essentials. He was in no discomfort and was unlikely to have required medical assistance. 'Shukran, I am fine,' was his response. He paused for a moment and then added, 'It is just that it could have been so different.' I gently enquired what difference he wished for. The floodgates then opened and he poured his heart out. He was performing his father's Hajj. The Hajj that was obligatory on his dad but that he never was convinced to undertake himself. The Hajj that his father actually gifted onto one of his loyal employees by paying that person's full package more than a decade earlier. The Hajj that would eventually evade him and that his son was now settling the debt to Allah on his behalf.



Some start the journey late, and never physically reach Arafat.

His mother years earlier was adamant that she wanted to fulfill her obligation and his father obliged. However, his dad, instead of going along, sent his son as a Mahgram. That was the same year that he rewarded his loyal employee who had long expressed the desire to stand on Arafat at the time of Wuqoof. 'Make Duaa for me,' were his words when his family departed for Saudi Arabia all those years ago. They tried to convince him to go along, to perform the rituals as a family. His wife cried bitterly when they left, and on the journey repeatedly expressed her longing for his presence. That was the time before there were quotas and up till the very last, the family and friends repeatedly tried to convince him to surprise his wife, but all attempts were in vain. Arafat plains were wide open, but he was not there.

A few years later the father had a heart attack, and he was hospitalized for a few months. His recovery was slow and needed a prolonged



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period of rehabilitation. His businesses carried on as usual as his children and loyal employees had absolutely no hesitation in doing their very best. By this time the Hajj landscape had changed. Strict quotas were enforced on all countries and a waiting period of a few years after registering for Hajj became the norm. The father never previously registered for the Holy journey. His medical condition deteriorated to the extent that he had to retire from his business, and he had limited mobility. He was medically stable but became short of breath easily and often needed to use a wheelchair. He still tried to fast on certain days and continued being as generous as before.

'I want to go on Hajj,' he out of the blue told his son one day. Just like that. No philosophical discussions and no confessions. Just that he wants to go on Hajj. The latter did not question him but knew instinctively that the illness made his dad relook at his religious debt. He immediately made the relevant enquiries. He was able to travel as long as he had assistance, but the waiting list was about five years. His son registered him and for two years religiously went to the authorities to find out if there was any way that his father could go earlier. Unfortunately, this never materialized and Allah recalled him three years after his heart incident. The son wanted to perform Hajj on his behalf but realised that it would take decades before that would be possible. A Hajj industry acquaintance who travelled annually to Saudi Arabia offered to perform the father's Hajj.

'Doc, I wanted to do it. My dad asked me and I, deep inside me, wanted to honour that request. I went to every agent, and even went to the embassy the same year of his death. About ten days before Hajj was to commence I was told that an alternative package through the Saudi system was available. It was very costly but I did not hesitate to take it. Everything was a rush, and I did not have much time to process what was happening,' he said. 'Until now,' he slowly added. 'I can never take his place on this journey that he too late in his life realised was one that he had to undertake,' he said.

'He should have been here on Arafat Doc, he will never set foot on this Holy soil,' he lamented. I looked at him sobbing. 'He is here, he is with you with every step that you take. Allah will bless him with an accepted Hajj as your noble deed will surely be rewarded by our Creator,' I replied.

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