

HAJJ STORIES

DYING AT HOME, AWAY FROM HOME

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“You are killing yourself, this habit of yours is going to lead to your death!” I exclaimed as sternly as I could. I was walking down the busy road when I spotted him leaning against the front door of the building he was residing in. It was hot. Of course it was hot as we were in Makkah in the heart of summer. Even though it was after Maghrib already, the crowds on the pavements, the humidity, the traffic jams and the hot exhaust fumes emitted by the virtually stationary vehicles all contributed to a barely tolerable climate out on the streets. I was sweating profusely after walking less than two hundred meters down the road. Before he became aware of my presence, he seemed to be nonchalantly observing those around him. He immediately tucked his hand behind his back when he saw me and smiled rather guiltily, knowing that I would comment on his smoking addiction.

We chatted for a few minutes. He had a few underlying medical conditions and I again reiterated the exponentially harmful effects the smoking had on his lung and heart conditions. He was one of the mission workers who came to assist the pilgrims. I again emphasized that the intersection of his unstable health, the stressful work environment, the oppressive weather and him smoking was a potent cocktail for medical complications. In his younger days he used to accompany Hujjaaj as a spiritual guide and we frequently shared stories of our encounters with our fellow travellers. What was evident was his love for our Deen. He recounted having to physically carry sick pilgrims for some distances when it was needed so that they could reach Arafat. Some of his exploits were absolutely legendary and he was held in the highest esteem in the Hajj industry. And here I was castigating him!



Janatul Baqi is the cemetery very close to where Muhammad (SAW) is buried

“We need you in the Holy Lands during the Hajj period,” I pleaded. He was now more in an assistant and administrative role for the South

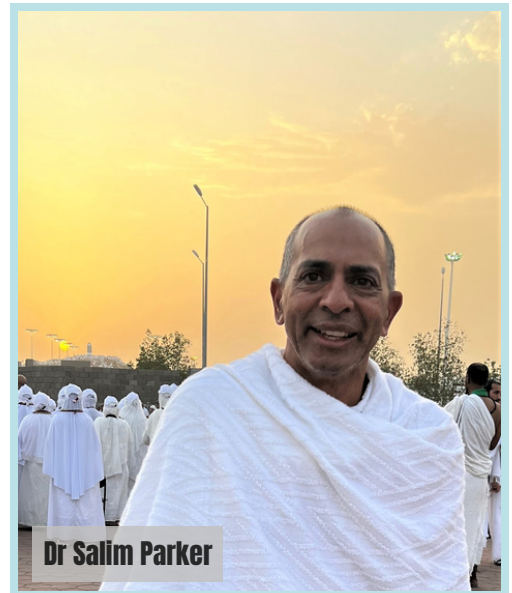
African mission, but his mere presence was very calming and spiritually reassuring for the pilgrims. He could assist with logistics, but also could advise Hujjaaj about the rituals of Hajj when their group leaders’ religious instructions were unclear. He was slightly out of breath as we stood on the pavement but insisted that he was feeling fine. “You probably have more smoke in your lungs than oxygen,” and that is going to compromise your heart,” I continued my sermon. “We all going to die some day,” he sighed. “I agree but you cannot die now as Hajj is a week away and your services are needed,” I retorted. “It is the best place to pass away in,” he responded in a very emotive manner.

“It is the best place to pass away in,”

“You cannot die now, Hajj is nearly upon us and there is still so much to do,” I replied and proceeded with diplomatically discussing the severe incapacities that smoking can cause. “Imagine in a few years’ time when your heart will be in Makkah or Madinah but you are too sick to leave your bed in South Africa because of preventable illnesses,” I added. We discussed a strategy to gradually reduce the number of cigarettes over a few months and then hopefully to stop. I acknowledged that it was indeed an addiction and for someone who has been smoking for decades it was not going to be easy. There must be a willingness to stop. “You always tell me of very poor people who everyone thought would never be able to perform Hajj. They set their minds on it and, decades later, after saving a few cents every day, they get to Arafat. Let’s apply the same mindset here,” I implored. He agreed.

That particular year Hajj passed uneventfully for most South Africans. We both commented afterwards how lucky we were that we could assist our pilgrims. In addition, I could don my Ihram for Arafat whilst unfortunately his contract precluded him from doing so. “Still, in my heart I was on Arafat, and Allah alone knows what is in my heart and how my Duaas will be accepted,” he lamented. The South African and Saudi authorities recognized his value as he was fluent in Arabic, was an Islamic scholar and a compassionate peoples’ person. It was little wonder that for this particular year his services were again solicited as he was familiar with the requirements of the mission. This year was also the first year post COVID where the usual numbers of pilgrims were to be permitted with South Africa actually having an increased quota.

He was not in the best of health and initially indicated that he would not be able to travel. But Makkah and Madinah kept calling! He had discussions with his doctors who, after some



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tests, indicated that he may go and assist the guests of Allah. Or maybe he just knew he had to go. Allah knows best. The mission workers first set up the required structures in Madinah, the City of our beloved Prophet (SAW) as most of our Hujjaaj first visit the City of Peace before moving to Makkah. He unfortunately became quite ill and needed to be hospitalized. He soon needed to be admitted to ICU and though he was in one of top hospitals and being treated by experts, his condition deteriorated. When I enquired about his health, I was informed that he was critical and from the description I was given, it was evident that he was going to need all our Duaas.

Umar (RA) is quoted as having said: O Allah, grant me martyrdom for Your sake and make my death in the land of Your Messenger (SAW).” Another Hadith speaks of the virtue of dying in Madinah: ‘Whoever is able to die in Al-Madinah, then let him die there for I will intercede for those who die there,’ our beloved Prophet (SAW) was reported to have said. Muhammad (SAW) is not reported to have said anything about the virtues of dying in any other city on this planet. I reflected on our previous conversation about passing away in the Holy Land. ‘It is the best place to pass away in,’ he said previously. That conversation took place in Makkah but now Allah recalled him in the City of Light and he is buried there amongst the many Sahaba.

I arrived in Madinah as part of my Hajj journey a few days after his Janazah and visited the graveyard. I did not know where specifically his qabr was but made Duaa for him and all the others buried there. Two weeks later I was privileged to be standing on Arafat. We made a point of chatting during the time of Wuqoof on our previous journey and I immensely missed his presence.

I thought of the Hadith which reminds us of not wishing for death, for whilst we are alive, we can add to our good deeds and repent for our sins. As I stretched out my hands in prayers during the time of Wuqoof I thought of his words that the Holy Land was the best place to pass away in. We should not wish for death, but we may wish where to die. He was laid to rest in the most noble of places, close to his beloved Prophet (SAW). Allahu Akbar.

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