

HAJJ STORIES

LIGHT AND DARK

DECEMBER 2024

The body, the muscles, in fact all the senses say you cannot continue any more. However, your mind and soul want to. Maybe the mind is also a sense, for it after a while wants to slowly and silently slide into a slumber. Sleep deprivation and physical exhaustion are not the best of bedfellows. It was not of our own doing. Circumstances conspired that a number of us had no sleep for two consecutive nights. We had major logistic issues the evening before the first day of Hajj and I had a number of medical cases that simply could not wait to be sorted till the next morning. Other workers in my group had to sort out buses to transport the pilgrims from Azizyah to Mina, as well as numerous other issues such as the official photo tags required to enter the camps during the five days of Hajj. That night was very long, the next day was even longer.

The first day on Mina was beset with seemingly minor but still vexing problems. Some pilgrims found the air blowers too powerful and wanted it switched off, whilst others wanted it on constantly. A simple solution would have been to move those who were getting hot closer to the machines with those not desirous of its cooling effect further away. But no, no one wanted to move from their positions and their bickering continued incessantly. There was an invasion of some groups' tents by others, some had their mattresses and pillows 'borrowed,' and in fact one of our tents was completely empty and we had to obtain replacement bedding from the authorities. We were a very large group, and several of our pilgrims had unstable medical conditions. I was kept occupied the whole day and evening. It may sound tiring, but it was really rewarding and uplifting to serve the guests of our Creator.

We workers were thriving on the rush of adrenaline. The authorities let us know that our buses transporting us to Arafat would reach us two hours after midnight and we had to prepare our pilgrims. Very few of the pilgrims slept, and none of the workers did. Part of Hajj is Sabr, patience. The buses were delayed and the pilgrims were dutifully told to wait thirty minutes, then another

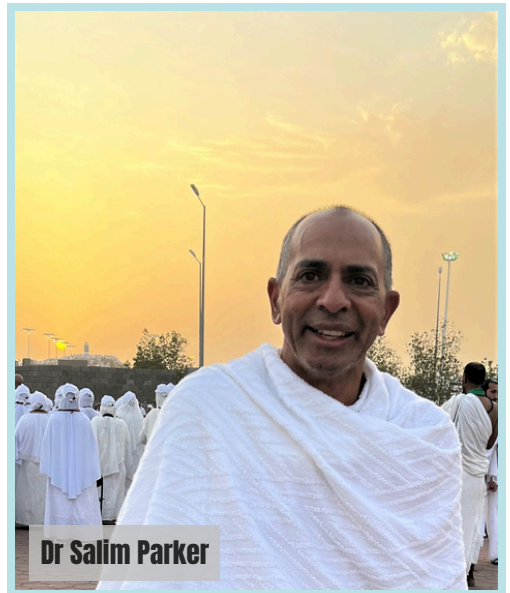
thirty minutes, and so it continued. The majority only reached Arafat after Fajr. Most were very tired and after performing their compulsory prayers and having a meal, they were all encouraged to rest. The most important time in the life of any Muslim was only a few hours away. The blessing of Wuqoof's gentle embrace was soon going to be envelop them. I attended to a few who still had their doubts about being ready for Arafat. 'You are here, this is Hajj,' I reassured them.

Some of us had at most two hours of sleep after two sleepless nights. One of our buses got lost and it was a logistical nightmare to ensure that our pilgrims eventually reached Arafat. Our staff had to see to their comfort when they reached us just after midday, and then took part in the collective Duas. Even though we as staff were completely physically fatigued, we were all on an amazing spiritual and emotional high. Several medical issues also had to be addressed, and then a few of us prepared to lead a group of close to two hundred to walk from Arafat to Musdalifah and then to Mina. Everyone's energy level was beyond the stratosphere as the fading rays depicting the onset of sunset heralded our movement from Arafat. Not a single person felt or looked tired. This was after all the time that we made Duaa that all our sins were forgiven.

'Only about two hours of sleep over nearly three days'

We walked. We walked with millions of others all in the same space but all our minds in a different place. Some tearing reminiscing of loved ones passed, others of bundles of joy left behind. As the hours passed and the distances covered increased, the disconnect between body and mind started to increase. Some manifested immediately by voicing their tiredness or physically slowing down or, when we rested along the way, being reluctant to start to walk again. Our group reached Musdalifah as a collective and soon had performed our combined prayers and collected our pebbles. There was about two hours to go till midnight when I was to accompany a group to Mina to pelt. Some decided to sleep till dawn following the example of our beloved Prophet (SAW). I realised then how tired I was with the toll of only about two hours of sleep over nearly three days taking effect. The following two hours were going to be like heaven! Alas it was not to be.

An elderly lady asked me to attend to her incapacitating foot blisters. She jubilantly waltzed around after her pain was instantly relieved by my treatment. Soon a few lined up and the seconds turned to minutes and then to hours. I was still busy when the group started moving to Mina, where we were to pelt the largest Jamaraat. More than half of the group was keen to continue to Makkah. They all had some sleep on Arafat and on Musdalifah,



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unlike us workers who by now were showing the effects of our sleep deprived states. But we still soldiered on. We were lucky to get a bus and very soon we were performing our compulsory Tawaaf. Walking between the hillocks of Safa and Marwa scrapped the last of our absolute physical reserves. I do not even recall what I was thinking at that time.

I walked with the last few pilgrims of our group. I saw one of the workers who acted as a sleeper fast asleep along the Sae' pathway. His job was to ensure that no one was left behind. I intended to message him that I was seeing to the last few pilgrims and once he awakens, he can make his way back to our hotel in Azizyah at leisure. However all good intentions dissipated as soon as I thought of them and I never messaged him. I managed to put all except one Hajj in a taxi to Azizyah. The latter had a few nights good sleeping sessions and in effect was more keeping a watchful eye on me than the other way around. The two of us found a taxi that quoted us an astronomical amount to take us to our hotel. Any other day I would have walked the few kilometers but that day I would have probably paid double if needed.

We barely set foot into our hotel when I was ushered into a room to attend to a desperately ill pilgrim who was brought here straight from Arafat. I have absolutely no recollection of what was wrong with him or what my treatment plan was. All I recall was that there was a reassuring glow in the room, a type of brightness that is difficult to describe as my cognitive abilities recessed into darkness. 'There was an angel in the room and it was not you Doc as it was next to you,' my companion later jested. The patient a few days later recounted that he was certain that he was dying, but then the collective Duas of fellow pilgrims somehow had an angel pull him back from the brink of death, with the help of the doctor's medication.

I remember none of that. My mind stopped functioning when I could inform all our pilgrims that they finished the major rites of Hajj and that only the pelting days remained. I was most likely in a fatigued induced stupor and was crawling on empty, but yet somehow could still be a doctor. All I know is that whilst I was in the darkest of physical recesses detached from a completely wiped mind, a noticeable light guided me correctly. Allahu-Akbar!!

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Muzdalifah is a place where our Prophet (SAW) rested and slept