

HAJJ STORIES

NEVER ALONE ON ARAFAT

MAY 2025

'I am so blessed to be going on Hajj,' she said. The pilgrimage was still about three months away, and she came to see me for her mandatory vaccines. We spoke about her general health condition. There was not much to talk about as she was in her early thirties, had absolutely no medical problems and was a relatively fit person who did some regular exercises. She was one of those who was accredited relatively late and she anticipated only going the following year. Her preparations were essentially geared toward a year later but when the offer came for the current year, she immediately accepted. This was followed by sorting out her finances, her leave from work, and her research project. She was an academic involved in some postdoctoral studies, and this normally follows timelines and schedules. All these now had to be adjusted, attenuated and be put behind a much more important journey, her Hajj.

'Consider that either your mother will be taking each step on this journey with you or that you are walking in her footsteps'

We spoke about the group that she was going with, and I assured her that they were staffed with extremely good, competent travel experts and very knowledgeable and experienced religious scholars. For Capetonians, Hajj is very seldom an individual journey. As she already has experienced, family and friends are as excited as the pilgrim. Scores had already showered her with a wealth of information that had to be assimilated. Of course all mean well, but it can be overwhelming. Friends of mine from Johannesburg marvel at the community bond that exists prior, during, and long, long after Hajj. One friend from up north once remarked that his neighbour once waved at him as he was pulling out of his driveway. 'I am leaving for Hajj tomorrow, please make Duaa for me,' the neighbour said before he also drove off to his business. There were no well-wishers, no congregation or invitation to honour at that pilgrim's house that night.



The presence of departed loved ones can be felt on Arafat

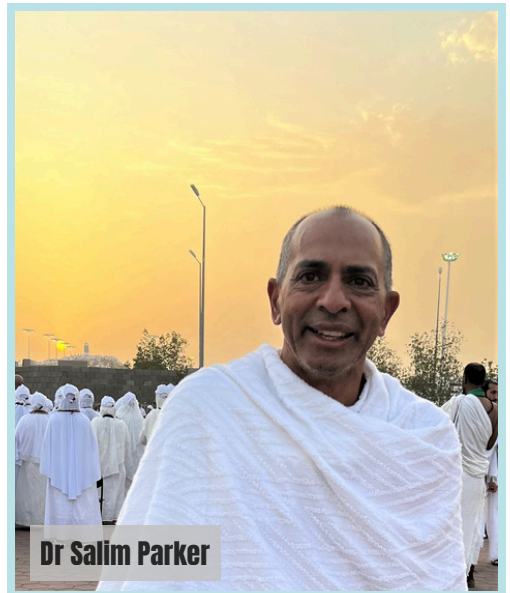
She spoke of the group meetings that she had already attended and realised that by the time she leaves, she would have become acquainted with quite a few already. I asked her whether any of her family or friends were also going on the journey. She was silent. Tears started welling up. 'No, no family of mine is going Doc,' she said. 'How I wish I was not travelling alone. How I wish that someone else was travelling instead of me,' she added. I was taken aback. She was so enthusiastic about the journey and was exuding all the energy and vigour that I normally see in all prospective Hujjaaj. Now, there was a sudden onset of sadness and apprehension when I mentioned family and friends. 'I do not understand,' I gently prodded, opening an avenue for her to elaborate on her change of mood. 'It concerns my mother,' she replied.

She explained that her mother was in fact accredited

to go for Hajj. Her mother was overwhelmed by the blessing and was getting all her matters in order. She had planned for the biggest journey of her life all her life, but we of course accept that Allah is the biggest planner. Our Creator tested the mother. Her health and strength deteriorated initially. Finally, Allah recalled her months before she could embark on the journey to the Holy Land. I extended my condolences. 'Bear in mind that your mother was accredited for Hajj and had made her Niyah to perform it. Surely Allah's infinite mercy will extend to her and she will be granted her Hajj as she intended to,' I said. She responded hesitantly in the affirmative. 'This is what I was told,' she replied. I fully understood what she felt. Somehow the ideal would be that someone, preferably her, should perform Hajj on her mother's behalf.

In essence the authorities had to speedily fill the spot vacated by her mother. Since most of the packages

were allocated and booked for already, it had to be a single lady willing to go for a specific period of time and sharing a twin room with another single lady. There were many others on the waiting list before her, but they either wanted to go as couples or with other waiting family members, for different durations or for cheaper options. She did not really consider all the above, she just said yes when approached. It now dawned on her that it was her obligatory Hajj, and that she could not perform it on behalf of



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her mother. At that moment I thought of the incident of our beloved Prophet (SAW) who advised someone to perform Hajj on behalf of a parent as it was a debt due to our creator.

We explored the fact that her mother already made her niyah and was unfortunately destined not to physically undertake the travel. 'Consider that either your mother will be taking each step on this journey with you or that you are walking in her footsteps,' I thought. The realities, and wishes soon set in. It is obligatory on each physically and financially able Muslim to redeem their debt to Allah once in their lifetime. There are two billion Muslims on this planet, and no one knows over how many this obligation still hangs. Currently only two million are permitted to go annually, though there are long-term plans to increase this number to ten million every year. Doing the simple mathematics reveals that most Muslims will never set foot on the plains of Arafat. The possibility of doing so twice in a lifetime would literally be one in a stratospherically large number.

I played around with the statistics. South Africa has a waiting list of ten years for a first time applicant to perform Hajj. Countries with a larger Muslim population have a two to three decade waiting period, and in one part of Malaysia it exceeds one hundred years. The authorities had to set up some rules, including the introduction of quotas for countries and giving preference to first time Hujjaaj over repeat Hujjaaj. In other words, a repeat pilgrim will always be pushed down the list by a new applicant. She would have to perform her Hajj first before she could consider embarking on the journey in her mother's name and knew that the odds of that were impossibly low. All the scholars are in agreement that there is no debt due by the demised parent in such circumstances. There is one act possible in such cases, to make continuous Duaa for the parent.

We all know that those who are able and who have never performed Hajj should always have preference over those who have either performed it or are not obligated due to medical or financial or other reasons. I have often been asked to motivate for someone who has never applied to perform Hajj and has been recently diagnosed with a terminal condition, to be accelerated up the waiting list. Opinions differ about this. Sometimes our hearts go out for such people. All we can do is to make Duaa that they somehow can say on Arafat: 'Labaik! I am here.'

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