

Always within Arafat's embrace

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They looked at their Ihrams. Both have worn their respective garbs four times, once on Hajj and on three other separate occasions when they performed Umrah. They knew that they were blessed as a couple to have been to Saudi Arabia and where I met them when we performed Hajj. We become close friends ever since. They were overjoyed when their first child was born after they performed their Hajj. They used to long to wear their closely treasured garb again, long to be performing Tawaaf, long to be on the plains of Arafat. The two of them were exactly like the many whose Ihrams is in effect part of their very existence, part of their life. They walked past it every day and longingly looked at it. But for the last few months it took on a different meaning for them. She was carrying their second child; he was preparing his Ihram to shroud their baby as soon as she was born.

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They are like many I know. They keep their Ihrams and proudly wear it whenever they have the chance to go to the Holy Lands. Some pass it down from one generation to the next and many have proudly and emotionally related how their grandparents and parents pledged to ensure that a particular Ihram will be donned by their offspring. It is the great unifier, with all being elevated to the same blessed status in the eyes of our Creator. I have seen the proud and arrogant humbled by the occasion. I have been privileged to witness some of the most powerful at complete ease with their inner peaceful and truthful selves. I'll never forget the ordinary tailor and a property magnate becoming soulmates on Arafat, each completely oblivious of the other's social and economic status. Even we doctors on Hajj who are honoured to serve the quests of Allah are only identifiable when a call is made that someone needs medical attention. It marks us all being equal, and being of the select few who were invited to be on the plains of Arafat on the day that Allah forgives more of his subjects than on any other occasion. It also prepares us for the world hereafter by reminding us that we'll be shrouded in a similar garb when we ultimately depart.

I have a ritual with my Ihram which I have followed for all but one of the last sixteen years. I always walk with a group on the Day of Wuquof from Arafat after sunset. We make our way in anonymity and yet universal uniformity amongst millions all still proclaiming 'Labaik!' We are here! The Ihram gives absolute permission for the pilgrim to continue emphasising this. We normally rest at the border of Musdalifah and Mina till midnight where after I accompany some of my Shafi brethren to pelt the Jamaraat at Mina. Most of

our Hanafi and a significant number of Shafis' stay over till sunrise at Musdalifah. Over the years we have built up an understanding of serving our South African hujjaaj optimally from a medical point of view. This requires me to be on Mina when the majority of pilgrims reach there after journeying from Musdalifah after sunrise.



Our Ihrams heard the duaas on Mina, touched the soil of Arafat, rested on Musdalifah and were worn when we performed Tawaaf.

I normally make my way to Mina, pelt and thereafter request one of the thousands of workers at the Jamaraat to trim my hair. This enables me to get into civilian clothes and make my way to Makkah to complete my compulsory Tawaaf and Sa'ie and then my way back to Mina to man the medical tent. I have walked, clung to the roof of a minibus taxi, was the third passenger on a tiny one seater motorcycle, squeezed like sardines to be the eightieth passenger on a fifty-seater bus when embarking on this journey but always managed to finish it. Undertaking this journey in Ihram is difficult due to the time constraints and that's why I change into civilian clothes, carrying a heavy Ihram in a backpack all the way is even more so especially as access to the Haram is denied to those carrying bulky parcels. I hence discard my Ihram wherever I can, not out of disrespect but merely due to practical reasons.

My friend and his wife, like millions of others, have none of these restraints and treasure their pieces of cloth. During the second pregnancy, it became clear that their child, whilst comforted, nourished and protected in the mother's womb, would not survive the harsh uncompromising outside world despite the best technology that modern medicine could offer. They knew that their daughter would survive only for a few minutes once she was born. He knew what he wanted to do. He walked past his Ihram every day. It had heard the duaas on Mina, touched the soil of Arafat, rested on Musdalifah and it was worn when he performed Tawaaf. His Ihram prepared him for life as if he was a new born child, he wanted to his new born child to be

donned as if she was on Arafat. He wanted to use his Ihram as her final departure shroud.

When he informed his family about it, there was discomfort with the idea. We all knew that the baby in the womb was a girl, and the fabric of his Ihram was of a firm quality, perfect to withstand the elements during the physical journey of Hajj but maybe too harsh for

the delicate soft and silky skin of a new-born daughter. He consulted widely and was reluctantly persuaded that, after entering this world and being in her parents' loving arms during her short tenure, she would be gently shrouded in a soft garb once she has given her last breath. After emerging from the life-sustaining womb, she spent a priceless few minutes with her parents before Allah ultimately recalled her. They proceeded as planned and left for the Kabrastan with the baby gently covered in her soft cloth.

The Janaza proceeded as envisaged. As they lowered her body into the grave onto the planks that form the base of any Muslim's final resting place, it was realised that the plastic sheeting that was to cover the planks was missing. This plastic prevents the sand that finally fills the Kabr from slipping down between the planks. 'Would my Ihram work?' he hopefully asked. Consensus was reached that it was the most appropriate material under the circumstances and her final resting place was on her father's cloth that was blessed by its presence on Arafat.

The mother asked me why they did not think of taking a photo of their beautiful beloved daughter. A picture will of course faithfully portray the physical features. But it can never tell the full story of their love for each other, for their children and for their Deen. When they look at their Ihrams in the future, it will evoke the cherished realisation that their daughter was resting on material dusted by the spirit, toil and soil of their Hajj. May it lead to smiles filling their hearts, always.

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