



It seemed that Ayesha had her life partner and best friend with her on the most important journey of their lives, writes DR SALIM PARKER.

HAJJ is a wonderful journey.

We are all detached from the realities of our lives back home where the drudgery, mundaneness, routines and responsibility of everyday life fast forwards time to the extent that we wake up shocked one day and ask ourselves what happened to all our now long forgotten objectives.

No, on Hajj every day seems so purposeful. Long before the actual days of Hajj arrive, the new routine in firstly Madinah and then Makkah fills us with a sense of purpose, a desire to live the rest of our lives there, and a new sense of community.

True, those at home in South Africa are missed. However, the desire is for our beloved to join us in the Holy Land, and not for us to catch the first flight back to the country of our birth.

Our lives revolve around going to the Haram five times a day for the compulsory prayers and drinking Zam-zam, and a few additional times with new-found friends for tawaaf. Meal times are again time to cement new relationships. The good in us flourishes. The type of life that we can live forever.

Ahmed* and Ayesha* were a couple who epitomised the goodness Hajj brings out in people. Forever smiling, always courteous and constantly assisting whoever needed help in any way, their lives in Arabia revolved around deep conversations with fellow pilgrims about everything in life and how the journey was influencing them.

They formed firm friendships with a number of people. Ayesha befriended Kulsum*, whose marital status had recently reverted to being single.

The two became inseparable. Soon, Kulsum accompanied the couple when they performed their tawaafs, they sat together when they had meals, they joked, shopped and explored the surrounding souks together.

The bond between the two ladies was growing stronger and

stronger. It seemed that Ayesha had her life partner and best friend with her on the most important journey of their lives.

When they performed prayers in the Haram, Aslam would be with the males, and the two ladies would inevitably be together somewhere in the ladies' section, not far away.

Hajj drew the three of them very close to each other. I recall our shaikh and myself commenting on the positive effects that Hajj has on people. We recounted the number of people who had met on Hajj and have been close ever since.

I, too, without fail, visit an elderly couple whenever I am in Johannesburg. We met on our first Hajj nearly twenty years ago. I have attended the nikahs of couples who had met on Hajj, witnessed the name-giving of the new lives born of these unions and attended funerals of fellow hujjaaj whom Allah had recalled.

The circle of life sometimes accelerates to completion within a surprisingly short period of time. On Hajj, we all want to do things absolutely correctly and within the prescribed parameters of our religion.

Though we never asked them, we are sure that they often went to the Haram during the early hours of the morning, during Tahajjud time, to ask their Creator for guidance.

Some in the group speculated about where the friendship was heading. 'Aslam is going to ask Kulsum to marry him, just wait and see,' someone told me.

'It is perfectly permissible for a Muslim man to have more than one wife,' our shaikh reminded us when the topic was mentioned in one of the many informal discussions that hujjaaj often have.

Hajj brings out the best in us most of the time. It also brings out the worst in people. Unfortu-

Occasionally, we see men with two spouses performing tawaaf.
Photo SALIM PARKER

Life and life's ironies

nately, there are always a handful who seem oblivious to the positives of the journeys.

They find fault with the colour of the décor of their rooms. They complain that the same 20 desserts are served at their buffet suppers every night, and get upset when it is pointed out to them that they only need to taste one or two every day, and not sample all of them.

'We paid for it,' they would grumble.

Some would stay in their hotels during the prayer times instead of being part of nearly a million all making salaah in unison in the Haram, and who derive the benefit of prayers blessed with more rewards than any other mosque on this earth.

It was Ayesha who first broached the subject of the marriage between Ahmed and Kulsum. A discussion ensued with the shaikh.

It was the perfect formula. Two ladies who were very good friends, a married lady who had no objection, and who, in fact, had requested her husband to ask for the hand of her best friend in marriage.

Ahmed was by the financial means to support two wives and he was, by now, very close to Kulsum as well. The shaikh indicated to them that as Ayesha had no objection to the union between Ahmed and Kulsum, and had, in fact, initiated and encouraged it, that it should proceed.

I was not privy to the discussions but can well imagine its humble nature. I am sure that they had asked Allah to guide and bless them when they stood on Arafah.

I thought of the contrasting incident we had had a few weeks earlier when a wife wanted to jump from a twelfth-storey window in Makkah when she learnt that her husband had remarried without her knowing.

We had tried to dissuade her, and indicated that though the husband should have obtained her consent or at least informed her, there was nothing we could do about it.

Then she told us that the second wife was also in Makkah for



Couples normally find performing tawaaf together an intensely bonding experience.
Photo SALIM PARKER

Hajj and this infuriated her even more. 'And,' she screamed, 'she is staying in a far superior hotel than me!'

The shaikh involved was asked to perform the nikah upon their return to South Africa. It was, in many ways, going to be a completely new life.

We all have descended from the slopes of Jabal Rahmah, the Mount of Mercy, with the sincere hope that Allah has forgiven us all our sins and would bless all our future deeds.

The shaikh ensured that Ayesha was present when the nikah was performed.

It was the ideal end to another Hajj story. But life and fate does not always follow the romanticised and sanitised script that we all wish for, living happily ever after.

The relationships changed over the course of time. Ayesha became unhappy for reasons that remained in their private domain and, after a while, she was divorced from Aslam, with Kulsum still wedded to him.

Ayesha has since remarried and is living her own life.

We often reflect on how we all want the perfect world of Hajj to last, and that we could ideally live in Arabia forever. But we have to return home, a salary has to be earned and bills need to be paid. The circle of life returns to its predictability, and what happens in everyday life resumes with some of its unforeseen conclusions.

**Not their real names.*
For more Hajj Stories visit www.hajjdoctor.co.za. You may contact Dr Parker via e-mail: salimparker@yahoo.com

