

HAJJ STORIES

ARAFAT MEMORIES NEVER FADE

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'It's like a light slowly fading, until only pitch-black blankness envelops me. Then suddenly someone switches on the light, and I can see clearly after being dazzled initially,' he said. He sounded scared. He was just over eighty and was trying to describe his perception of his fading memory. This was one of his more articulate moments. There were times when his words were jumbled but he was quite enthusiastically conversing with me. His physical wellbeing belied his age. He could walk for hours, but found his way back home difficult. He could still drive but this was becoming more difficult. His extended family thankfully seemed to have convinced him that one of them would always be available to drive him where he needed to be. There was one topic that somehow seemed to not only switch on his light, but also keep it shining brighter and for longer. Something that has occupied his mind for more than twenty years. Hajj.

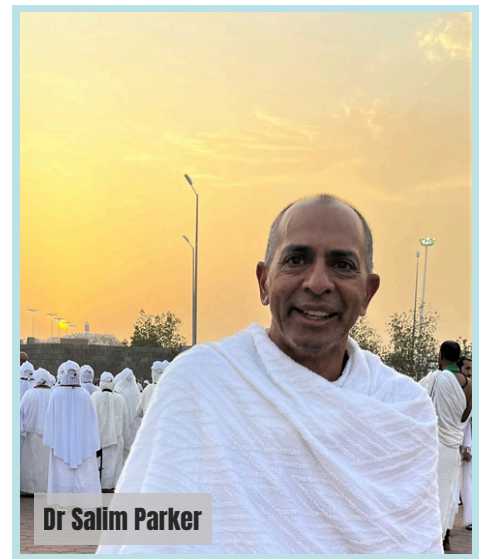
'I am alive. I worked my whole life for this journey. I must go,' he told me. He had opportunities early in his life but readily admitted his indifference towards the compulsory fifth pillar of his religion. 'I was young when my parents asked me to accompany them and felt I was not ready,' he told me. After he married he thought even less about it. His wife at times pestered him about embarking on the journey and he somehow diverted the question with seemingly practical obstacles. Like the house extension for his growing children. He first wanted to settle all his debts. She saved some money for their journey. He never touched it for any of their family expenses but there were always impediments. Children starting university and he had to be around. Children getting married, and they had to be around. Then his wife passed away.

That was twenty years ago. He had immense regrets, but it was too late. She never performed her Hajj. She failed to repay her debt to her Creator and it was his fault. His extended family was there for him but all of them combined could not fill the voluminous void she left. He became depressed and disinterested in life. 'I should have immediately gone for Hajj and maybe a year later have performed a Hajj on her behalf,' he said. Instead, he needed treatment, including admission to a psychiatric hospital. He coped but was existing on medication. Five years passed before he fully recovered. The Hajj money was gone. He could not remember touching it. It was supposed to be safe in a bank account that was on his wife's name. Someone withdrew it within days of her passing away. No one could be connected to the theft.

'I lived for it, I am living it now, and I'll forever relive this time.'

'I was of sound mind fifteen years ago,' he said. 'And now?' I asked. 'I don't know,' he replied with a helpless gaze staring into some ethereal space. 'That time I decided to save money. I had a basic pension and did some odd jobs which allowed me to save enough over the last fifteen years. My children, though well educated, have their own expenses and I never mentioned Hajj to them. Neither did they ask me about it. I supposed they inherited their father's bad genes,' he remarked drily. I knew that was not the case. He was not involved with his finances previously, that was his wife's domain. His one son, who regularly reported to his siblings, was acutely aware of his Hajj wish and had been keeping an eye on his interactions with a very reputable Hajj agent. They regularly contributed to a package that would cover a luxurious trip.

He had enough money when his accreditation was announced. He wanted to go. His family wanted him to go. There were distant family members going, as well as others in the Hajj group. Of course all would keep an eye on him. Every sane person wanted the same. But there were whispers that his memory was failing. That Hajj was not mandatory if there were major medical, physical or psychiatric instability. That maybe he was not fit enough in one way or other. That his place can be taken by someone for whom Hajj is compulsory. An Imam who knew him well had noticed the cognitive decline but still could have conversations about Hajj with him. Yes, these talks were becoming shorter as the years passed but he knew exactly what was required on the days of Hajj. More importantly, Hajj was all he was living for.



'So Doctor, you are supposed to assess if I am fit to travel?' he had asked me at the start of our consultation here at home. I smiled. It was evident that physically he more likely was going to assist other younger pilgrims than himself being helped. 'I am worried that you will say that I may not travel, I did not sleep well the last few nights,' he confessed. After distracting him and completing my medical examination, I smiled reassuringly at him. 'You received your invitation from Allah. No one has the right to withdraw it,' I said. I explained that the Hajj group will ensure that all will be well. 'I'll be with you on the journey and if there are any issues please do not hesitate to get hold of me,' I offered. 'If I remember who you are,' he replied.

He definitely had some memory issues. However, his ability to socially interact was still sound. He had good long-term memory and an adequate short term one. He had two unwavering and concrete thoughts, his wife and his Hajj. Some may refer to it as obsessions or fixations. I see his Hajj calling as a life-wish, which would be a sin to deny. A meeting was held with his family and Hajj operator to discuss logistics. He understood that he was always to be accompanied by a fellow pilgrim or group worker. He always planned to go as long as possible. 'Seven weeks of heaven for me and hell for my companions,' he joked. I knew that he would be fine as circumstances were just perfect for him. And so it turned out. He had a bout of bronchitis initially but other than that he took part in all of the group's activities and was cognitively sound when we reached Arafat.

'Doc, before I forget, I need to tell you something,' he said with a wicked grin. It was towards the time of Wuqoof. I could just smile, marveling at his wit. 'Maybe in the future I'll not be able to talk about this moment. But just like the memory of my wife and my desire to perform Hajj, this time on Arafat is permanently entrenched in my memory. I lived for it, I am living it now, and I'll forever relive this time. If you see me in the future and I seem demented, just speak about our time on Hajj. I am sure you'll then get me to smile and start talking about this unbelievable journey. There is no way that old age, disease or dementia can ever cause this moment to fade,' he related to me.

I never saw him again after Hajj and he passed away a few years later. All I know is that Hajj wrapped him with happiness and memories that smoothed his journey till his lights finally were completely dimmed forever.

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Our time on Arafat is permanently entrenched in our memories