

HAJJ STORIES

WHEN THE LIGHT STAYS OUT

AUGUST 2026

'You are in a completely dark room. But feel around, somewhere there is a handle that, when turned, opens the door that lets in all the light.

'Doc, it is easy for people to quote those words. But I am not in a dark room. I am in a completely dark world. If I find that handle, it opens only to another pitch-black area. And when I somehow exit the building, it is night, and it is pitch-black outside. No moon is evident, and dense clouds obstruct the distant stars' valiant attempt to flicker some shimmer of light through the immeasurable distances to me. I do not understand what is happening to me. I have a good wife, really perfect children, a very supportive family, and in my mind, have no cause for my depression. I know of a lady who was in a horrific car accident that left her disfigured and physically scarred after multiple surgeries. Her husband left her, yet she smiles and appears happy and content. What is wrong with me?' he lamented.

'I want to go home. My Hajj will be worthless.'

Nothing was wrong, and yet everything was wrong. We were in Makkah about two weeks before Hajj was to commence. For most people everything felt so right. He had acquired Canadian citizenship about a decade previously after living in an African war-torn country all his prior life. His wife was a native of his adopted country, and she was the one who brought him to see me. Their group was housed in the same hotel as the South African group that I accompanied, and she heard that I was seeing pilgrims who needed medical advice. She was well educated, deeply religious and was financially very stable. 'Hajj will be your saviour,' she had urged him, and also pleaded for it in her prayers to her Creator. There was desperation evident in her eyes as she spoke about her husband who she clearly deeply cared about.

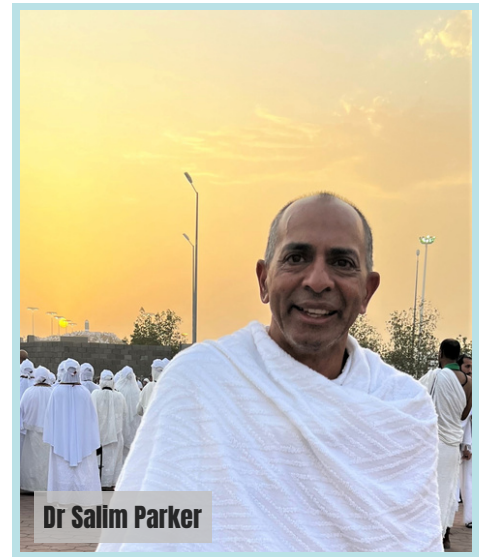
He clearly had severe depression. Prolonged childhood trauma had a major impact on him. Moving to Canada as a refugee and then obtaining citizenship sounds like a dream come true, but in reality, he was trying to assimilate into a community where some did not easily welcome foreigners, and others openly despised them. He moved from one oppressive system to another one. He tried his utmost to be productive in his new surroundings. He was extremely intelligent, garnered one academic qualification after another, was well liked at his local Masjid, and got married to a local who embraced Islam in her late teenage years. His religious circle and community were supportive, but outside that he was a perpetual intruder. That is how he perceived it. He was on some of the best medication and was functioning at work and at home. But he knew no happiness.

He arrived in Makkah about a week before I saw him. During that time he had become more withdrawn, eating only when literally being forced to, and only going to the Haram when being urged along by his spouse. 'I thought coming on Hajj will have a positive influence on him,' his wife said. 'He is now in another foreign country, with crowd densities reaching suffocating and frightening levels and his dark skin colour automatically designating him to a lower human status. It is the supreme irony that in this City, where on the Day of Arafat our Prophet (SAW) declared all humans equal, racial discrimination was so palpable,' I thought. I examined him after initially having a chat to him and his wife, and noted that he took his prescribed medication, which was of the best I knew of, regularly. He had good insight into his condition and was not delusional or irrational. He was however severely depressed.

'I don't want to be here,' he said. 'I want to go home. My Hajj will be worthless,' he added. He had not slept for a few nights, and this aggravated his mental status. Medication for insomnia is banned in Saudi Arabia, but we managed to source a locally permissible product. I advised him to take one that evening and see me again the next day. He came the next day, accompanied by their group Imam. He did not sleep a wink, he informed me. He was even more withdrawn. I had managed to obtain an even more potent hypnotic and asked him to use it that night and he and his wife left my room. The Imam asked if he could speak to me. 'He wants to go home. Hajj is not obligatory on him, and we cannot stop him from leaving,' he informed me.

That year was my fifteenth year of accompanying pilgrims as a doctor. At that time the Saudi authorities would not allow anyone to leave until Hajj was over and I informed the Imam about this. 'Then maybe we should have him admitted to hospital. He is not eating, not sleeping, is clearly deteriorating medically and mentally and also does not want to perform Hajj,' the Imam suggested. I explained to him that this particular situation was much more complex, as approaches towards psychiatric conditions differed from that to other medical conditions. I knew of critically ill patients flown by helicopter over Arafat to ensure that they had at least a moment there on the Day of Wuquof. I once accompanied a patient in an ambulance who was hooked onto several drips and who needed oxygen support for the same purpose.

Mental conditions were viewed in a different light. Some types indeed have a complete detachment from reality with sufferers not even being aware of who they are, let alone where



they were or who they were with. Others were completely delusional, and at times posed a danger to themselves, to others, or both. When admitted to hospital in Saudi Arabia during Hajj, they are not high on the priority list to get to Arafat. Arafat, on whose grounds even a mere moment on the ninth Day of Thul Hijjah is an essential part of Hajj. No Arafat, no Hajj. As simple as that. Some viewed that the psychiatrically afflicted do not need to perform Hajj whilst being symptomatic. If he was admitted to hospital there was the real possibility that those in charge of him would hold a similar view and not bother arranging for him to be transported to Arafat at the required time.

'Let us wait a few days,' I suggested. I wanted him to get a few nights sleep and to start eating. Those in his groups were praying for some improvement and held daily Thikrs for him. I advised that he not be forced to go to the Haram. He at last got some sleep, and about three days later started increasing his caloric intake. He did not mention that he wanted to go home and actually attended the Jum'ah prayer in the Haram three days before Hajj started. Though his mood was still very, very depressed, there was awareness of who, where, what, and when. My group moved to Aziziyah a week before Hajj but I stayed in touch with his wife and the Imam.

On the first day of Hajj, I called his wife. Her husband answered. He sounded very monotonic but spoke clearly and deliberately. I am going to Arafat tomorrow Doc,' he said. That is all I wanted to hear. Labaik! Allahu-Akbar!



Sometimes it takes a while for the light to reach us