

THE ROAD TO TARIM

To my parents
Shafioellah Mohammed Mahlunker &
Asma Haron Mohammed

*And We have commanded people to 'honour' their parents.
Their mothers bore them through hardship upon hardship,
and their weaning takes two years. So be grateful to Me and
your parents. To Me is the final return*

(Qur'an 31:14).

**THE
ROAD
TO
TARIM**

**RAEES
MOHAMMED**

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Endorsement

In a time and era plagued by distractions and psychological inertia, Hafith Raees provides a motivational biographical account of his most intimate experiences in his young adult life, particularly his time in the blessed city of Tarim. This reflective piece serves as a panacea to inspire all youth in understanding the critical need of embracing and employing hardwork and dilligence in any worthwhile activity. However, the greatest value of this book is the authentic engagement Hafith Raees expresses in dealing with matters of spirituality and this world. Hafith Raees displays intellectual and spiritual maturity beyond his years, and I have no doubt that this book will have a positive impact on its reader.

DR YOUSUF PATEL

About the author

Raees Mohammed is a 25-year-old from Cape Town. His journey seeking Islamic knowledge started when he left school at the age of 11 to memorise the holy Qur'an. Raees started at Jami'ah al-Qur'a where he completed 13 Juz. Thereafter, he moved to An-Nur Islamic Educational centre where he completed his memorization of the Qur'an and become a Hafiz. He graduated from the institution under the esteemed Egyptian Qur'a, Shaykh Sayyid Ebrahim and Shaykh Mahmood Hassan.

He resumed Islamic studies at the same institution later, before leaving South Africa to pursue his studies in Tarim, Yemen, where he completed the Arabic programme. He benefited extensively from the scholars in the holy city, including al-Habib Umar bin Salim Bin Hafiz, al-Habib Ali Abu Bakr and al-Habib Abu Baker Mashhur.

After returning from Tarim Raees become an entrepreneur and was admitted as a sworn translator of the High Court of South Africa, through the guidance of Dr Muneer Abduroaf and Shaykh Saliegh Cerers.

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Raees is currently a sworn translator of the High Court of South Africa, and a postgraduate student at Henley Business School Africa, where he was awarded the dean's merit scholarship award to study the postgraduate Diploma in Business Management Practice (PGDIP). He is also a Strategic Account Director at Technology Strategy Corporation.

By the will of Allah, Raees aspires to pursue the Master's in Business Administration (MBA) in 2022.

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I would like to take this opportunity to thank Allah ﷻ for affording me the opportunity to share this journey with you. Without Allah ﷻ nothing is possible.

I would also like to thank my parents, who I am actually not able to thank. May Allah bless them and grant them all the best in this world and the hereafter.

I also want to thank my five brothers, who were there throughout my journey and who are still there. May Allah reward them and grant them the fruits of this world and the next, insha Allah.

I would like to give special thanks to all those who contributed to my journey. They would not want me to mention their names. May Allah guide and protect them.

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Shukran
Raees Mohammed

CHAPTER 1

Important Decision

Arriving in Tarim, I did not know what to expect. I had heard many stories about the great city, the ancient city, the city that holds the most descendants of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. A spiritual city, a city untouched by Western influence, a city that has been affected by so many countries around the world, through knowledge, spirituality and so much more. I first came to hear about this city from a family friend. He was a very humble, respectful, and knowledgeable man. I respected him as a person and as a scholar. He studied in India for many years.

I indicated to him that my dream was to further my studies in the way of Islam. I told him I had no money, but I did not want to pursue studies in South Africa. He told me about a city - Tarim - which he described as the city of light. The way he described it was unique. He had so many good things to say about the place, even though he had never been there. I have never heard anybody speak that way about a city.

The family friend's name was Ismaeel. Shaykh Ismaeel advised me how to go about things that would enable me to undertake the journey. I reiterated that I did not have any funding. I remember clearly that he told me, "Allah ﷻ will be your Provider". I did not understand what he meant. I just followed his instructions.

After doing research about Tarim, I thought it might be a suitable place for me. I contacted Shaykh Ismaeel and told him I thought it would be a good place to go. Before I could repeat my funding issue, he said again, "Allah ﷻ will provide". Shaykh Ismaeel sent me the details of Shaykh Abdurragmaan Khan. I did not know him. I sent him a text message telling him exactly what I wanted. He responded, asking me to meet him at the masjid of which he was the Imam. The masjid was not far from where I lived. I remember meeting him after Ṣalah al-Isha'.

Upon entering the masjid, I saw a man sitting right at the front. He wore a turban, thawb (prayer garment covering the body from the neck to the ankles, or just above them), and jubbah (cloak). Surprisingly, he looked exactly like the man I had seen on the internet while doing research about Tarim. I approached Shaykh Abdurragmaan and he greeted me before I could greet him, and then welcomed me. The first thing he asked me was, "Are you sure this is what you want?" I thought this was a strange question and I responded, "Yes".

Shaykh Abdurragmaan gave me clear directions about the process I had to follow. After being accepted by Dar al-Mustafa, I told my mother about my decision to pursue my studies in Tarim. She immediately rejected my plans, saying, "We are not able to send you, you know our situation, we are just getting by". I kept quiet and walked away.

The next day I carried on as normal, went to work as I did every day. I worked at a logistics company where I was earning a basic salary. I gave half my salary to my mother and kept the other half. It barely saw me through the month. I felt that my life had hit a block. I had very little going my way, I had no direction, but I felt that the Tarim journey could be special and could change my life, but now it seemed it was also not going in my favour.

Weeks passed and the beginning of the study year was drawing nearer, which meant that I had very little time to decide if I would be going to Tarim. I remember it was near the end of the month of Ramadan - I made lots of du'a to Allah ﷻ and asked Him ﷻ to somehow open up this journey for me. As the days went by I was so close to giving up, but continued making du'a. Ramadan was ending, and I received an invitation from a friend who is a very successful individual. He had a few restaurants around Cape Town in South Africa. I was born, raised and reside in Cape Town.

After work I rushed off to the city centre to attend ifṭar, arriving at maghrib. We first prayed, had ifṭar, and then performed Ṣalah al-Isha and Tarawīḥ. I led them in the twenty raka'at of Tarawīḥ. After Ṣalah most people left, so I was able to talk to my friend who is about 15 years older than I am. We had a long conversation and I told him about my plans and decision to undertake a journey. I refer to this friend as the Chef, as he is the owner of several restaurants and is an amazing cook.

I explained to him the current situation, and my family's circumstances. He knew I did not come from a wealthy family. I was crying and he told me to calm down. He said, "The reason that I called you here tonight was to find out exactly what is happening in your life. I wanted to see where I could assist you to achieve your goals, as I always saw you as a young man

full of passion and very goal-driven, so I will assist you with whatever you need. I am telling you here: I promise to sponsor your flight - not only one way - it will be a return, so you can decide when you would like to return". I was shocked. I tried to thank him, but I was lost for words. After spending some time at the Chef's restaurant, I went home to inform my family about the good news. My mother still did not agree with my decision as she knew that the country I would be flying to is at war. I insisted that it is what I wanted, and nothing would change my mind.

The next day I resigned from work and I recall the managers and the CEO said to me that the decision I was making was a very bad one, that I would not gain anything from the journey, and that the country I was going to is a Third World country. That dented my confidence, but I stuck with my decision, resigned, and was looking forward to my travels.

The day after I resigned the college, Dar al-Mustafa, emailed me, saying I could no longer attend as classes had already commenced and I would be late. I felt like a truck had run me over. I still remember the feeling; it was dreadful. I called Shaykh Abdurragmaan and his line was busy. I was at a loss as to what to do, and I was in a state such as I had never been in before. I had just resigned from my job and the college was telling not to come to Tarim.

Later that day I received a call from the Chef to check on my preparations. I explained what had happened and he said, "Do not panic. Come to me after work. There is something I need to convey to you. I feel this is the right time". After work I waited for nearly two hours for the Chef to arrive. We had dinner and I explained the situation again, this time in more detail. I told him that my parents did not approve of me going. They were afraid of the danger because Yemen was at war. I said that many people were telling me what a bad decision it was and there would be no success in it, and that I had received an email from the college rejecting me. He then said, "These things are supposed to happen. It's all a test, my friend. If you can't handle this bit, how will you handle being in Yemen all alone"?

The Chef continued, "Let me convey to you my story. Whatever you see around here, do you think it is due to overnight success? Of course not. I was once in your shoes. I arrived in South Africa at a very young age. I remember the day I came. My uncle received me, and I had to start work immediately, no questions asked. I worked in my uncle's restaurant in Mitchells Plain in Cape Town. I had no choice. I had to work 7 days a week from 6am to 11pm. So, for three years I had no proper sleep. I felt broken as I had been in South Africa for three years and I had not had the opportunity to leave

Mitchell's Plain. I realised that this would not work for me, that I needed to do something to make a better life for myself. If I decided to marry, how would I provide for a wife and family?

I reached out to a friend who was the head chef at a restaurant in New York City. I explained my situation and asked him if there were any opportunities available. He asked his boss if I could work there as a chef, but his boss refused. My friend said, 'It's your choice, there are always jobs available, so come and see what opportunities there might be'. After speaking to my friend, I realised that I needed to make a change because the money I was earning in Cape Town was barely enough for me to survive. I also sent money home to my parents in India who are very poor.

I decided to go to New York. I saved every cent I could and when I had saved enough, I purchased my ticket and prepared to leave. When the day came, I was excited and afraid. My parent's friends and uncle did not approve of my decision and said I was making a big mistake. I did not listen to anyone and decided to stick to my decision. Later that day, the world received news of the 9/11 events and all flights to the US were cancelled. It felt like the world had stood still for a moment. All news channels and all people were speaking about it. I missed my opportunity and had to wait for months. I booked another ticket and decided that I would take this journey regardless of the outcome. My friends and family were furious again, but this time they had a better reason for rejecting my decision as of course Muslims were blamed for the 9/11 event. I did not listen to their advice and decided I would be going on my travels.

Upon arrival in New York, I recited *ṣalawat* upon the Prophet ﷺ and asked Allah ﷻ to make my entry easy. It was very difficult for any Muslim entering the US at the time of the 9/11 events. I made so much *ṣalawat* and *du'a* that when I arrived at the airport in New York, not one official or anyone else stopped me. I saw Muslims being targeted, but I just walked, kept reciting and the next thing I knew I was in a cab to the restaurant where my friend was a chef. I saw my friend and he was happy to see me. His boss was at the restaurant and my friend said we would go job-hunting for me after his shift. His boss overheard, came over and asked, "Are you a Chef"? I said, "Yes". The boss said, "I have a vacancy, but it requires you to work a double shift for 7 days a week, are you up for it"? I accepted and never looked back. I worked 7 days a week for about 5 years and saved up enough capital. I headed back to Cape Town and opened my first restaurant. Sacrifice is the food of the successful, remember that".

I was stunned by his story and it motivated me to stay with my decision. It made me realise that people tell you what they think is best and never

just support your decisions. I discovered something very important that day - advice is important, but decisions are made between you and the Almighty. The Chef booked my flight and left me with some encouraging words. I headed home and told my parents that I was keeping to my decision to undertake the journey. My father didn't say much, but my mom was still against it.

A few days before my flight I said goodbye to my work colleagues and the maintenance man came to me just before I left and gave me an envelope. He said, "There is not much in here, but by the will of Allah ﷻ it will assist you". I didn't think too much of it. I thanked him and left. Two nights before my flight my father saw on the news that there had been an explosion that day in Yemen. My mom was furious. She told me to cancel my ticket and not to go on the journey. I argued for a while, then I kept silent and went to bed.

The next day I called Shaykh Abdurragmaan to inform him that I would be leaving in 24 hours and explained the events of the previous night. He sent me the details of a student who had just arrived home from Tarim. I gave the details to my father, who contacted the student and asked him many questions about safety. He explained to my father that he had spent a full year in Tarim and that it was safe to go. But my father refused to accept that what he said is true. Shaykh Ebrahim Gabriels overheard the conversation, took the phone, and spoke to my father. Shaykh Gabriels assured my father that it would be safe as he had returned recently from visiting his son in Tarim. My father accepted the word of Shaykh Gabriels and then said to me, "It's fine, you can go ahead with your journey". My father trusted the word of Shaykh Gabriels because he is a well-known Imam in Cape Town, trusted and respected by the community, and in addition, he is also a scholar.

The day before my journey I prepared everything that I needed and gathered every cent I had. My concern was that my ticket was paid, but I only had R7,000 and a few rand in savings while the tuition for my full stay for the year was R13,000. That night I made du'a to Allah ﷻ that I would get to Tarim, and I put my trust in Him ﷻ completely. I was due to fly on the Saturday evening. The evening before, I had many visitors, friends, family, and friends of my parents. The majority of the visitors were there because of the qualities of my parents. My parents did not have wealth, but they were kind and generous. As the visitors left most of them put a gift or an envelope in my hand, something I did not expect. On Saturday morning, I opened the envelopes, and, to my astonishment, I calculated that the monies came to about R12000. This was close to double the amount I had saved and would be enough to cover my tuition and boarding. I sat there in tears and just kept thanking the Almighty ﷻ.

I banked all the money. Before I left the house, more people arrived to see me off, many of them were family, friends and neighbours. Shaykh Abdurragmaan also came, as did the Imam of the local masjid, and many people I hadn't seen before. The Imam had mentioned my journey in his Jumu'ah talk the previous day, so I surmised that this could be the reason why so many people came. They could also have been sent by the Almighty ﷻ.

Shaykh Abdurragmaan and the Imam gave thought-provoking speeches. As the time came for me to say farewell to my family, everyone recited ṣalawat. My parents, brothers and family cried, and I was very excited. I understood that not only was I leaving, I was also traveling to a country at war, and this had my family worried more than anything. It was hard to leave as it was the first time I was leaving Cape Town. It was an emotional experience, but also exciting. I wish to emphasize that I sincerely appreciate all the support from my family and friends, knowing that if it wasn't for the Almighty ﷻ sending them to me, I would not have been able to undertake the journey at that time.

At the airport, I gave all the envelopes that I had received on the Saturday to my uncle. He calculated that the monies came to a total of R9,000. I was so shocked and remembered the words of Shaykh Ismaeel, "Allah ﷻ will provide". I realised then that Allah ﷻ was certainly blessing my travels and He ﷻ was the All-Knowing, the All-Seeing and the One who provides sustenance to all. I received even more gifts from friends and family who came to say farewell at the airport. My uncle exchanged the R9,000 for US dollars. I needed dollars because the dollar is an international currency, and my tuition would have to be paid in dollars, so they would be more useful than rand.

I had to greet my family and friends, but most importantly my parents and five brothers. My little brother had been crying continuously since we left home, and he was very emotional. We were very close, growing up. We did everything together. We were underprivileged but we found things to do together and have fun regardless of the circumstances. I appreciate all my brothers and love them dearly. My two eldest brothers had worked endless shifts over weekends to help to support us when the rest of us were little, and Allah ﷻ has granted them success, Alhamdulillah, and because of their generosity, I regard them as heroes.

My parents were crying too, and it was the first time I had ever seen my father cry. I had felt as if I was not his favourite child, but that day I saw his love for me in the tears he shed. He is a true hero, and I can never thank him enough for all he has done and will continue to do for us.

I can say this much about my mom's amazing qualities: she is a true example of sacrifice. I have never heard her complain. She made sure we ate, and she tried to give us the best that she could. I will never be able to show enough appreciation for my mother, no matter how hard I try. Even if I were to buy her the world, it would not make up for what she has done for us. My mother is the true hero.

As I headed through the terminal with everyone bidding me farewell, my journey truly began. I travelled through Dubai and Qatar to get to Salalah in Oman. There the journey became difficult. I tried to communicate with the people, but they laughed at me. Everything was in Arabic. I did not understand Arabic at the time, and I felt utterly lost. I was to meet a student from Port Elizabeth at Salalah Airport. I had no internet connection and could not contact him. After roaming the airport for hours, I saw a person coming down the escalator, but I did not know whether it was him, as I had not seen him or his photo before. We had communicated via WhatsApp, and he had said he would wait for me at the airport in Salalah. Not only did I not understand Arabic, I also had no experience of travelling, so it was very kind of him to wait for me.

He called out my name and I replied, "Yes". He hugged me and said, "Alhamdulillah". His name was Ali. He had been waiting for me for more than a day. While he waited, he had booked our bus tickets and made arrangements for our journey. We had to travel from Salalah to Yemen by bus, a 24-hour journey, or maybe longer. We stayed at the airport for another day until our bus was to leave. By then, brother Ali had been at the airport for more than two days. He explained to me that he always enjoyed Cape Town's food. I remembered that I had chilli bites in my bag, which my mom's friend had given me, as well as brownies from my cousin. I offered them to him and saw that he enjoyed them. That was the start of a good friendship between Ali and I. We agreed that we needed to stick together to make this journey successful.

We went to the bus stop and boarded the bus. Ali was very well grounded in Arabic, so he did all the talking. He told me to speak very little as we were foreigners heading into a war zone. We travelled for a long time through the mountains of Oman. The roads were so scary, the bus seemed to be about to break down at any moment, and the driver took the bends around the mountains very fast. After many hours we reached the border with Yemen. The process took a very long time, and the border officials searched all our belongings.

We were not allowed to leave the bus. We had to wait until they gave the go-ahead. Everyone had to give 100 USD to the official collecting the

money. We had no choice as they said the visas we had were not valid. The soldiers at the border were fully armed and looked dangerous. I was afraid because this was real danger and we had to comply. After the official had collected the money, Ali took take a photo of the situation at the border. He didn't realise that a soldier had spotted him. The soldier called his fellow troops and two of them entered the bus. I did not understand Arabic, but they spoke to Ali in a very harsh tone, instructing him to follow them into the offices.

I was very afraid. I did not know what to expect, as this was a country in war, and who knows what they could do to him. Hours went by. The bus driver became restless and didn't want to wait any longer. I went to look for Ali, but could not find him. Minutes before the bus driver decided we were leaving, the soldiers and Ali came out and they let him go. I could see that Ali was afraid, judging by the reaction on his face and his body language. As we headed to Yemen, Ali told me they had removed his sim card, scrolled through his entire phone, and searched his whole body, even the most private areas. He said all he could do was pray to Allah ﷻ that the situation got better.

In Yemen, the closer we got to our destination, the worse the roads became. The sun had set, and we were tired. We took turns to sleep as we could not trust anyone at this point. When I was awake, I wondered how the bus driver would be able to stay awake for the full journey. I saw him chewing on a plant. He had been chewing it since we left Oman. When he awoke, Ali explained to me what it was. It was a plant they used in Yemen to stay awake - some sort of drug. The plant made the eyes of the bus driver so big. It looked like his eyes were going to pop out. It was my turn to sleep, but it was so hard to sleep because the bus driver was speeding, the roads were in poor condition, there were no lights, and I felt the bus might crash at any moment.

As we approached a small city, we were instructed to change buses. We did not wait long, and the new bus driver seemed calmer. Ali and I fell asleep for some time. When we arrived at our destination one of the passengers woke us. We exited the bus and before I could ask Ali if we had arrived in Tarim, a person drove past us and said, "Şallū 'ala al-Nabī". Ali said, "We have arrived," and we stood in the blessed city of Tarim. The journey to Tarim felt like it had taken a lifetime already.

Seeing the beauty of the people's character, I could tell I was in a special place. We approached a cab driver, asking him to direct us to Dar Al-Mustafa. He told us to get in and for a small fee he transported us to the Dar. At the Dar the streets were quiet. I could only hear dhikr Allah coming from the

building in front of us. As we were about to enter the Dar a man approached us. He looked like a Cape Malay. I didn't understand Arabic, so Ali spoke to him and told him where we were from. He took us into the Dar, and I saw light everywhere. We entered the muṣallāh (the praying area, and the place where circles of dhikr and classes were held), and I immediately saw the shaykh who was standing at the front. Everyone was kissing his hand and showing him so much respect. This was new to me. Ali told me that he was al-Ḥabīb 'Umar. Shaykh Abdurragmaan had always spoken highly of him. As soon as I saw him, I could tell he was a special person.

When we entered the muṣallāh it was after Fajr salah. The brother who looked like a Cape Malay introduced Ali and I to a South African brother, Faheem. He welcomed us with a smile and said, "Welcome to Tarim".

CHAPTER 2

Arrival in Tarim...

Arriving in Tarim, it felt as if I had travelled back in time 100 years. Everything seemed so 'old school', as one sees in Western movies. The houses were built of mud and some buildings even resembled that time-period. The roads were mostly gravel. Everyone's attire was similar, either a thawb or izar (lungi) with a shirt. There were mostly motorcycles - hardly any motor vehicles. It felt as if I was in a place separated from the earth and it felt very strange.

An Indonesian introduced us to Shaykh Faheem, a South African brother. Shaykh Faheem introduced us to Shaykh Ighsaan, a student from Johannesburg who had been living in Tarim for 10 years. Shaykh Ighsaan gave us advice that would be useful later. I spent some time with him, and then took take a nap in the muşallah. I did not know what was going on in the place and I slept for a few hours.

Shaykh Faheem was very welcoming and took us on a tour of the Dar, the streets, and the surroundings. It was fascinating walking through the streets as he explained the history of some of the great 'ulama who had walked these same streets in the past. He took us to the administration offices to complete our registration. I was to join the Arabic program and Ali had to take a test to determine the level at which he would enter as he was already well grounded in the Arabic language.

After Ali's examination, the administrative officer showed us to our dormitory. I was shocked to see that there were no beds. Students slept on very thin mattresses or on the cement floor. We were nine students in one dorm, which was very small and crowded. After settling down, we introduced ourselves. There were two Indonesians, one Malaysian, one Yemeni, one Indian and two Tanzanians. We prepared for Ẓuhr ṣalah. After the ṣalah we had to return to the administrative officer for Ali's results. However, he directed me towards my class.

One of the Tanzanian brothers from my dorm was in the class. There was one Somalian, the rest looked Malaysian, and the lecturer was also Malaysian. The lecturer spoke in Arabic and I did not understand what he was saying. I felt totally at sea. The class had started a month previously, meaning I was a month behind the other students. After class the Somalian, whose name was ‘Abd Allah, greeted me and spoke in English, much to my relief. He sounded American and said he was from Seattle in Washington. He told me not to worry, things would get easier. As we were both faced with the same situation, his words made me feel better.

On the way back to my dorm I met Ali who said it was lunch time. In the eating area everyone sat in circles, about seven per circle. Ali and I sat on our own and a few brothers joined us. When the food came, I was puzzled. It was served on one big plate. This was the first time that I would have to eat this way and it felt strange. After eating, Ali and I headed back to our dorm. He said that he had done well in the test and that he would be leaving the next day to another city because the Dar had placed him in the second year of the program. I was so disappointed and realised that I would be the only South African living inside the Dar. Shaykh Faheem and Shaykh Igsaan both lived outside with their families. I was yet to meet Zainudeen, the son of Shaykh Gabriels.

The first day felt like a week as I was not familiar with the program, but Ali felt comfortable because he had no problem communicating. After a long day, it was already 11:30 p.m., so we went to sleep, wondering what awaited us the next day. In the dorm, I was given a very thin mattress with a plastic cover. Ali said we should not remove the plastic, as it acted as protection from bugs. I was exhausted and slept. I woke up to someone shouting, “La ilaha illa Allah”, the lights went on and the air conditioner was switched off. It was very warm, and I was sweating because the room was very hot, and I had slept on plastic. I felt as if I had slept for only ten minutes. Ali said we had to get up. I looked at the clock and it was 3 a.m. and I thought it was a ridiculous time to get up.

We had to prepare to head to the muṣallah. This was to be our daily routine. Ali was to leave later that day. Day 2 at the Dar turned out the same as Day 1 - very long and depressing, I still felt lost and did not know what was happening. That evening I said farewell to Ali. I had known him for less than a week, but I felt as if I had known him all my life. After he had gone, I went to my dorm and slept. Every time I slept and woke again it felt as if I had slept for only 10 minutes. The sleep was too short while the days were very long.

CHAPTER 3

The Dawrah

The Dawrah was an annual event held by the Dar. It was a forty-day program. People would travel from all over the world to attend. It was a huge event and the lectures of al-Ḥabīb ‘Umar were always very full. Shaykh Abdurragmaan was scheduled to arrive with a group of South Africans to witness the completion of the Dawrah.

The first few days in the Dar felt like weeks. I had hardly spoken to anyone as I struggled to communicate. Shaykh Abdurragmaan and his team arrived. I spent some time with them and learnt that most of them were scholars from Cape Town and one of them had also studied in Tarim. After meeting Shaykh Abdurragmaan, I met Zainudeen. He seemed humble. I spent time getting to know Mawlana Waseem, who was also very humble. He saw that I was uncomfortable and always tried to motivate me. I also spent time with Shaykh Muneeb Johadien. He was humble and did not speak much but kept advising me how to go about things.

I spent the last few days with Shaykh Abdurragmaan and his team before they left. They invited me to sleep in their hotel for a few nights and I got to know them all. We travelled to different parts of Yemen. They were invited to many places as guests. It was so exciting that I nearly forgot about the struggles I had gone through the few days before their arrival. As the time for the departure of Shaykh Abdurragmaan and his team drew nearer, I realised that I was going to be alone. The evening before they left, I sat in front of a shop and was not aware of my facial expressions, but Shaykh Dilawar, one of the team who had studied in Tarim, sat down next to me. He spoke to me and gave me so much encouragement. I remember his words clearly: “There are so many people around the world who are crying to be in your shoes, you are a student here, no responsibilities, what Allah ﷻ has granted you people cry for every day, so appreciate it and make the most of it, it is only one year”.

He patted me on the shoulder, and we left for the Dar the night before the Dawrah ended. There was a massive gathering. Shaykh Abdurragmaan spoke fluent Arabic in front of thousands of people with cameras everywhere. It was thrilling. I made du'a to Allah ﷻ to grant me that ability one day, in sha Allah.

The day after the Dawrah Shaykh Faheem, Zainudeen and I bid farewell to Shaykh Abdurragmaan and his team. Shaykh Faheem and I went to the Dar and Zainudeen went his own way. The Dar was very quiet that morning. The Dawrah had made things so lively. After it, only the students who were there for full-time study remained.

CHAPTER 4

The Tartib of the Dar (Program of Study)

After the Dawrah things immediately changed around the Dar. Al-Ḥabīb ‘Umar left for his annual Hajj travels and the Dar automatically seemed less busy, which meant that the students could concentrate much more effectively. The program was as follows: we woke up every morning at 3 a.m. The person in charge of waking up the students shouted out loudly, “La ilaha illa Allah”, switched on the lights and turned off the air conditioners. If we were late, he would lock the gates and we would be locked inside. Our names would be recorded and reported to the administration office.

The speakers in the hallways sounded loudly with a designated person reading the morning adhkar, so sleeping longer was not an option. After leaving the dorm we prayed tahajjud, joined the adhkar and waited for Fajr. After Fajr ṣalah there were more lengthy adhkar and a muṣafaḥa (traditional handshake), where we would stand up in congregation and greet everyone in the muṣallah. If al-Ḥabīb ‘Umar was around he would stand in front and we would line up to greet him. Everyone would fall in line after that and that is how everyone got a chance to greet one another. The students kissed the hands of some of the respected Ḥaba’ib. I found that strange, so I did not join in. I just greeted with a normal handshake.

After the Fajr Adkar we headed to class. If al-Ḥabīb ‘Umar was there he would have his morning class in the muṣallah for students who were at a high level. Our first class lasted 1 hour and 30 minutes, then we had a break for breakfast. After breakfast we returned to class for another hour and finished at 9:30 a.m. We then had a break until Zuhr. Ṣalah al-Zuhr was between 11:15 a.m. and 11:30 a.m.

During the break we could not leave the campus. The rules were very strict. So I took a nap most days. After Zuhr there were more short adhkar

followed by another class for 1 hour and 30 minutes. Then we had lunch. After lunch there was about an hour before the Asr prayer. Before Asr there were adhkar, and after Asr a class with al-Ḥabīb ‘Umar or al-Ḥabīb ‘Ali Abu Bakr for an hour. The class was followed by more adhkar for 30 minutes.

Between the adhkar and ṣalah al-Maghrib, time was very short depending on the length of the Ḥaba’ib’s class. During this break we could leave the campus for a short time, but we had to be back before the adhkar of Maghrib started, otherwise our absence was reported to the administration office. Between Maghrib and ‘Isha’ we recited the Qur’an, I revised my ḥifẓ by reciting to someone in my class. Ninety percent of the students had also completed memorising the Holy Qur’an.

After ṣalah al-Isha’ we attended our final class for the day for about 1 hour and 30 minutes. After class we had supper and after supper we had only 15 minutes to do muraja’ah (revision). The whole campus gathered in the muṣallah for revision. Like all other classes, revision was compulsory for all students living inside the Dar. Revision took about an hour. When it ended, the time was between 10:30 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. After revision we had the only real opportunity to sleep. After preparing for bed most students showered. This took 30 minutes because if you were not early you would have to wait in line as there were only a few showers available. After showering it would be about 11:30 p.m. and finally we could sleep and prepare for the next day, which started at 3 a.m.

On Mondays and Wednesdays after our last periods, we had special classes with al-Ḥabīb ‘Umar. If he was not available al-Ḥabīb Abu Bakr al-Adani took his place. Like all the others, these classes were compulsory. We had somewhat of a break on Thursdays and Fridays. Thursday mornings were like every other morning. After our last morning class, we would have to clean our dorms. After ṣalah al-Zuhr we were free until ‘Asr and were allowed to leave with the permission of the administration office. However, if any student had a bad week, or overslept or came late for class he was not granted permission to leave.

After ‘Asr, al-Ḥabīb ‘Umar very rarely had a class, so we were free until Maghrib. A big mawlid took place after Maghrib on Thursdays. People from across the villages and neighbouring cities attended. The mawlid was nearly as big as the Dawrah gatherings. After the mawlid we had about an hour to go out and do whatever we needed, but there was not much to do anyway.

Fridays were the most relaxing as we had no classes in the morning, but we still had to attend the morning adhkar, Tahajjud and Fajr. Immediately after Fajr there were visitations to Zanbal, the graveyard where all the awliya and great scholars are buried. The visitation lasted about an hour. We then

returned to the Dar, had breakfast, and had the rest of the day off until ‘Asr. Jumu‘ah was beautiful. All the students dressed in white and walked to the masjid not too far from the Dar, where either al-Ḥabīb ‘Umar or Shaykh ‘Umar al-Khaṭīb delivered the Friday sermon.

Friday lunches were good. It was the only day we ate meat, but it was very little, with seven people eating from one plate. There was no meat refill. It was very little, but we appreciated it so much.

After ‘Asr al-Ḥabīb ‘Umar had a class, and from then onwards, the day continued as normal with classes after Maghrib, and it ended at 11:30 p.m.

The only time we could rest was on Fridays after Zanbal visitations until ‘Asr. Most of us would use this time to rest because the week was so demanding mentally and physically. The weekly tartib (program of the college) was hectic for me, coming from a very different environment. Very little sleep, and so much reading and focusing was new to me. I knew it was going to be a long bridge to cross, a bridge that at that moment I felt I would never traverse.

CHAPTER 5

Life inside Dar al-Mustafa

Food in the Dar

Living inside the Dar was the greatest challenge I have faced in my life. I was 21 years old and knew very little about travelling and living abroad. Wherever we find ourselves in the world, every place has its own challenges.

There were no luxury foods available. There was a restaurant open during lunch and supper times, but food was expensive, and the quality was not the best. The Malaysians utilised the restaurant as most of them could afford it, while the rest of us had to eat the food provided by the Dar. I had no problems with the food in the Dar.

Breakfast was the same meal every morning – bean curry with rolls and a small cup of tea. Like we did for other meals, we sat in groups of seven and ate from one bowl. We could never over-eat. We had to make sure that every student ate a good amount as there were rarely refills. Occasionally there were, but the amount was very minimal. We were served rice for every other meal besides breakfast. Lunch was rice and tomato puree with a tang to it, and at times we had fish. Chicken was served for lunch once a week if it was available, but a very small portion with no refills. On Fridays, meat was served if it was available, but also in very small portions. Dinner was the same as lunch.

For students from the West from privileged backgrounds it was a battle to adapt to the food in the Dar. After a few weeks in the Dar an American student asked me how I was able to handle this type of food every day. I smiled and replied, “I am struggling to adapt to everything else in the Dar, but to me the food is the easiest part”.

I said to him there were times in my life growing up in Cape Town when we literally had no food, and this brought tears to my eyes. I said there were

times that food like beans and bread were a daily meal in my home. There were times we went for months without eating meat or chicken or even take out, so if there is one thing that will not affect me, it is the food. I will always be grateful for this food. If I look back to my younger days, the food we were served in the Dar was a luxury to me.

There are many stories that made me more appreciative of what we were given to eat. There were students from African countries such as Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, and other countries. After speaking to them it made me reflect that my childhood was hard, but what they had been through was a real struggle. Some of them told me that they preferred living inside the Dar because at home they would eat three or four meals a week and very small portions, and the houses they lived in were cold in winter and warm in summer. Many of the Muslims globally have so much to be grateful for yet we complain, and desire more than we have.

Living Conditions

Living in the Dar was hard for me. I struggled from beginning to end. People who travel to Tarim to study or visit but live outside with family have no idea of the hardship and struggles of living inside the Dar as a student. However, I did not know about the challenges (perhaps financial or otherwise) of those living outside. Living inside was a very different type of struggle.

There were students who had been living inside the Dar for years. I saw how hard it was for them, but they would not admit it. Now that I am back home, if I were to return to the Dar, I would have to start over, and probably struggle all the way through again. The lesson that I learnt is that to succeed in something and overcome it, we need to accept that it is hard, but do our best to overcome it. Once we overcome it, we will see the fruits of our sacrifices.

After Shaykh Abdurragmaan and his team left Tarim, I felt alone. I was the only South African on the inside even though there were a few living outside. There was Ali, of course, but he had left Tarim. I was not familiar with the living conditions. The toilets were sunken into the ground, unlike the toilet bowl of Western toilets. The shower was situated in the same cubicle as the toilet, which was very strange. The toilets were clean but very “old school”.

At home we only shared toilets with siblings, so in the Dar it was tough to work out how to use the same toilets as so many different people. It was difficult and I took a long time to get used to it. Students would use the toilet, shower, and wash their clothes in one cubicle during the same session

in order to save time, because time was so limited. I had to learn to do the same. Washing my clothes was tough because, although life was not easy at home, we had a washing machine and I had never washed any clothing by hand. If the washing machine was broken my mom washed our clothes by hand every day. In the Dar I learned to appreciate my parents more and more for the many things they did for me. The majority of the students did their own laundry while some students used the laundry shop and I used it on a few occasions.

Living in the Dar was hard, but what got me through the struggles was du'a and understanding my purpose, the reason for being there. I also put myself into other students' shoes. Even though I was battling with the living conditions, there were always students who were worse off than I was. I just kept thanking Allah ﷻ as He ﷻ could have made things harder for me if He ﷻ wanted to.

Students of the Dar

There were many students from all over the world living in the Dar. I had to take each student as my brother and we had to share everything, from toilets and showers to plates and cups, and even sometimes thawbs.

I learnt some very important lessons about communication. Dar Al-Mustafa is an Islamic institution, but the number of lessons in life one learns while living there would usually take people years to study. I learnt skills that I did not realise I was learning, such as good communication. After communicating with so many different people every day I began to understand their cultures, I understood how to communicate with them, and I knew which mode of communication they preferred.

As first-year students of the Arabic program, we lived inside the Dar with other students at different levels of study. I do not recall any student in the Dar being arrogant. All of them were humble. The second-year and third-year programs did not take place inside the Dar. Certain students were there, but the majority were at other branches of the college located outside the city.

Interestingly, I discovered that the majority of the students living in the Dar were past the fourth and fifth years of study at the college and were fortunate to have benefitted from many 'ulama outside the city as well. My increased communication with most of them taught me that they possessed a lot of knowledge. Back home in Cape Town, I encountered some graduates who had completed three-year or five-year programs, who acted as if they knew so much, and who behaved with some arrogance.

The reason I mention this is that the majority of the Dar students had completed studies before attending Dar Al-Mustafa. I pondered how much knowledge some of these students have, yet they classified themselves as students. It was humbling to know this. Knowing that I will probably never reach their levels of knowledge made me realise my own level. I would like to mention a few of the remarkable students whom I found knowledgeable.

Hudayfa

A Tanzanian brother in my room was a remarkable character, a person to whom I looked up. He was in his 20's and had been studying at the Dar for about 4 years in 2016. After getting to know him I realised that he had sacrificed a substantial part of his life in the path of Allah ﷻ. He left Tanzania as a teenager to study for the sake of Allah ﷻ. He went to South Africa where he completed his ḥifẓ and four years of an 'alim course at the same Dar al-'Ulūm. His father then instructed him to pursue studies in Tarim. Without a word, he followed his father's instructions and left for Tarim. He has been in Tarim ever since. I contacted him recently, that is, in 2020. He told me that the Dar had requested him to teach and he is now a teacher at the Dar.

This shows the heights which some people attain yet they remain humble in everything they do.

Shaykh Amin Buxton

When I first met Shaykh Amin, I did not realise his calibre. He did not dress flashily and was very humble. In one of the mawlids, a student spoke, and Shaykh Amin stood next to him and translated his talk. I was surprised as in the few weeks that I had come to know Shaykh Amin he not once boasted about any of his knowledge. He was certainly someone that Allah ﷻ has blessed with humility. Later I heard from one of Shaykh Amin's colleagues that he had spent more than 10 years studying in the Dar and with Ḥaba'ib in various parts of Yemen. He had also studied before going to Yemen. Unfortunately, I was unable to communicate much with him as I did not know enough Arabic, and the rules of the Dar prohibited speaking in any language other than Arabic, so communicating was tough.

The Dar was full of knowledgeable people who had truly sacrificed years in the path of Allah ﷻ. I pray that Allah ﷻ blesses them for all their hard work.

Shaykh Faheem

I regarded Shaykh Faheem as a big brother, and he inspired me. He had made many sacrifices. He had worked hard in his working life in order to travel to Tarim to pursue Islamic studies. He left a job where he had earned well and had built a comfortable life, but Allah ﷻ granted him the wisdom to follow the path of Islam and spirituality in his life.

Shaykh Faheem moved to Tarim with his wife and two children and lived there for about three years. I benefited from him in many ways, especially through his lessons on life and his advice. We only spoke Arabic, so he assisted me with that too. The most impressive thing about Shaykh Faheem was that he knew when I was struggling in the Dar. He knew exactly what to say and how to say it to make me feel better. That is something special that Allah ﷻ has given him. The level of his scholarship and wisdom was high, which made me think that he was becoming like the people of Tarim and even resembled them in many ways.

I knew he also had his own struggles, yet he was always ready to assist me. This made me respect him immensely. Normally, when people are struggling, they try to avoid people or they complain, but I never heard him do either. He inspired me to become a better person and made me realise that I must never allow anything that happens in my life, whether good or bad, to change me, and that I must always be true and sincere.

The last person that I would like to mention was a role model for me. When I sat in his company, all that came from it was good and served as lessons in life. He was, is, and will always be an inspiration to me.

Shaykh Ighsaan Kholia

He is a South African from Johannesburg who settled in Tarim in 2008. He returned home a few times only. Before going to Tarim, he had studied in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

During my first two months in Tarim, Shaykh Ighsaan played a big role in making my journey a success as he lived in the Dar. Like Shaykh Amin and my Tanzanian brother, Hodayfah, he knew what I needed to survive and what I needed to do to achieve my purpose for going to Tarim. Shaykh Ighsaan advised me so many times I could write a book on his advice. His humility struck me profoundly. He is loved by al-Ḥabīb ‘Umar. I have not seen al-Ḥabīb ‘Umar love any foreign student as much as he loves Shaykh Ighsaan. Shaykh Ighsaan made me understand the importance of my purpose for being in the Dar - if my purpose was right everything else would fall into place.

Shaykh Ighsaan and Shaykh Amin translated al-Ḥabīb ‘Umar’s talks when recordings were made for those who needed the translation. Another reason why Shaykh Ighsaan inspired me was the way that he spoke Arabic, fluently and with proper pronunciation. Many people tried to get close to the Ḥaba’ib, but Shaykh Ighsaan, being the humble person he is, would be called by the Ḥaba’ib. This showed his sincerity. He humbled himself to a level lower than others.

Shaykh Ighsaan is the type of special person we do not meet every day. I was very fortunate to meet him and I thank Allah ﷻ. Not a day goes by without remembering his many gems of advice. May Allah ﷻ protect Shaykh Ighsaan.

There are many more students who have spent years in the path of Allah ﷻ studying every science. Imagine all the years some of these people have invested! This taught me that we can never have enough knowledge. If one compares the humility of these students to the highly self-opinionated individuals in South Africa who have completed short periods of study, one finds that these individuals feel they are entitled to express opinions on matters of the dīn and think their opinions should be regarded as authoritative. The ‘ulama in South Africa have made many sacrifices over many years and I believe we should respect them highly, yet I have found that the ‘ulama are often treated with little or no respect.

CHAPTER 6

My Arabic Journey

My Arabic journey was special. Arriving in Tarim, I had no knowledge or understanding of spoken Arabic. My only background was the Qur'an. I had memorised the Qur'an at a young age, so I hoped this would assist me. When I entered the classroom for the first few days, the teacher spoke to me, but I did not understand. The students in the class had been there a month already and I was behind. I felt miserable as they laughed at me. Also, I arrived in class tired due to not adapting to the program quickly. I fell asleep in class and woke towards the end. The lecturer let me sleep. I could see his sympathy, but he was unable to assist me.

After my first few days in class a student, Muhammad Sadiq, offered to assist me. He spoke English and was from Brunei, a country next to Malaysia. He invited me to his home. He lived outside the Dar with his wife. He gave me useful advice and I benefited a lot from him. He assisted me with Arabic, gave me vocabulary to memorise and sentences with which to communicate. He assisted me for a few weeks and then I did not see him again. I am grateful to him for his assistance. He saw the struggle that I was going through and did not need to assist me, but through his kindness, he did.

After the first weeks in the Dar, I still felt at a loss as to what was happening around me, and I had spoken to very few people. After three weeks my roommate, Ebrahim from Tanzania, asked me in English why am I not making friends. It surprised me that he spoke English. I told him that Shafee, a student from South Africa who attended here the previous year, advised to speak only Arabic. Ebrahim and I then decided that we would not speak English again and would use our free moments to memorise Arabic words together. Ebrahim was still a little boy when he came to South Africa and memorised the Qur'an. He was 16 years old at the time and was the brother of Hudayfa.

More time passed and I realised that I needed to improvise as I understood very little of what was taught in class. At one prayer I met Shaykh Faheem in the muṣallah and I asked him for advice on learning the Arabic language quickly. He advised me to write down every word the lecturer said and to memorise it. I thought it was a good idea and did as he instructed. I bought a notepad and wrote words I heard in class and everywhere in the Dar. I did not focus on the grammar being taught in class or read the books we were using in class. My goal was to memorise the Arabic words.

One evening I went to a phone booth to call home. A Somalian was in the booth, and I tried communicating with him in Arabic, but he did not understand me. Eventually I was able to make him understand that I wanted to call home. He assisted me to make the call. I spoke to my mom and family members. I complained to my mom about how difficult things were and her response was “It was your decision, no one forced you, you cannot come home and do not complain. Stay there and finish what you started”. After that call I decided the best thing to do was to cut myself off from any connection with family for at least a month or two to focus on my studies, and I did that.

After three weeks our Malaysian lecturer left, and we had a new teacher from Indonesia. He was a very good teacher, especially as regards his interaction with the students. After a month I started to understand small parts of sentences. But when the Ḥaba’ib spoke, I understood almost nothing.

According to Shaykh Faheem al-Ḥabīb ‘Umar advised that a student doing the Arabic program should try to memorise five words a day. I did this for the first few weeks and as time passed, I realised five words were too few for me as I had a lot to catch up.

Most mornings I almost fell asleep and arrived in the muṣallah very late. Sultan, a Somalian brother, also arrived late. I entered and sat at the back, lying against the wall to try to get some more sleep. However, the security did not allow it and forced us away from the wall. Abdullah, the American, spoke to Sultan every morning in their native Somali language. He communicated with me in English, but I responded in Arabic and told him not to speak to me in English anymore.

Every day was still a battle. I had little sleep and faced different challenges. I decided that I needed to improve the way I was doing things, to sleep less and study more. I ate less and did some physical exercise. There was hardly time to fit in any exercise, but I was determined to find a few minutes. I ate less at each meal and ran up and down the stairs for about 10 minutes a day. I added push ups and sit ups. Ebrahim joined me and we

kept this up for a while. After a week I felt a big difference. We continued this for a few months.

I realised that the early hours of the morning could also be used. While the adhkar took place, I memorised some words. Instead of sleeping in the muṣallāh, I tried to memorise words. The difficult part was to not forget the words. Sultan saw me doing this in the muṣallāh and offered to assist me. He said I should write a sentence using each word I memorised, and he would mark it. He became my early morning vocabulary teacher. We did so every morning and I increased my memorisation from five to twenty words a day within two months. I had over 5,000 words in my notepads and I continued this way of learning daily.

I visited the Somalian from the phone booth every night for an hour during the revision period, and I practiced with him. He corrected me and taught me a very important lesson, that I should not be afraid to speak and make mistakes. I kept to that philosophy throughout my days in the Dar. After a few months there were exams. None of the students knew that the Dar had a system where they had exams without notice to the students. Al-Ḥabīb ‘Umar made this a rule as he felt that certain students only studied for exams and did not work the rest of the time.

I failed the first exam in grammar. I knew I would not do well as I was not concentrating on grammar at the time. I remember getting the lowest mark out of the forty students in the program. I was not too concerned about the low mark because I had faith in my plan, and I felt the way that I was doing things was the best and easiest way to learn. I did fairly well in the Arabic language test.

I continued revising the words I had memorised and practiced whenever I had the opportunity. After three months I began coping more easily as I understood more of what was taught in class. The words I had written in my notepads were from all the environments I encountered. When we were eating or walking in the streets or buying things at the shops, I jotted down every word that I heard clearly. After three months I had written close to 10,000 words. I had not memorised all, but every day I added new words to my vocabulary. The language became easier as I was speaking and communicating, but still making lots of grammatical errors. It did not bother me as I knew I would get better progressively with so many people correcting me.

Ebrahim and I communicated as much as we could. We spoke about everything in our lives and in this way, we improved our language. I also became close friends with Abdullah from America, as he also took to spoken

Arabic quickly. He told me that the Somali language had many Arabic words so being Somali was an advantage for him. While Arabic was becoming easier, I still had a lot to learn. Sultan started doing a book with me every morning. We started with basic texts. This increased my reading and understanding sufficiently for me to progress to the next level.

After four months, I went from being the student many laughed at to being the best student in the Arabic program. I had become so driven to learn the language that I surprised myself. I knew then that I needed to step up another level. Students in the Dar spoke about how hard it was to understand the speech of al-Ḥabīb ‘Umar. I experienced this too. For the first few months I did not focus much on al-Ḥabīb ‘Umar and his teaching. I felt that he was not the only reason I was in Tarim and because I did not understand what he was saying.

As my understanding in the Arabic program improved, I began understanding more of the grammar. From then on, in every lesson I tried to shift my focus, recognising that I needed to improve and be able to understand Arabic at an even higher level. I had reached a stage where I had surpassed the level of the class and needed to do more to improve my language. Looking back, when I arrived, I was a month behind each student. Now I felt I was ahead of everyone, especially when it came to speech. After four months I spoke Arabic better than students who had spent years in an Arab country. However, I still felt that it was not good enough and I could achieve more. I purchased another book which I intended to use solely for al-Ḥabīb ‘Umar’s speech.

In all Ḥabīb’s classes, I tried to record everything that he said. He used a lot of Qur’an and hadith in his speech. I found this hard to understand because I had not learnt the interpretations of Qur’an and hadith. I was only a few months into the Arabic program, and we had not touched on any of these sciences. Nevertheless, I started writing every day and my book began filling up with so much new vocabulary that was more classical than the modern Arabic of the Arabic program.

Due to my lack of grammar, I found it difficult to understand classical Arabic. I went to Sultan and he explained what I had written down of Ḥabīb’s speech in very simple language. This made it easier for me and he showed me how to understand many grammatical constructions without explaining the names of the rules. I worked out that he must have studied the Arabic that as I was doing and that is how he knew how to teach me. Even after devoting a few months of my time to understanding Ḥabīb, I still found it quite difficult as he talked about various topics and spoke Arabic at a very high level.

At the beginning of 2017 I was halfway through my studies. I had done very well in exams because of the hard work that I had put in and my efforts had been successful. When the first semester was over, the administration office of the Dar advised me to enter the second level of the program. I decided not to as I knew that I would be at the Dar for only a year and wanted to maximise the benefit of being there. The Dar was the hub of knowledge around the Ḥaḍramaut region and I felt that I had to stay.

One day we were walking in a group, returning from a gathering. As we entered the Dar I saw ‘Ali. I was so happy to see him and he smiled. I had not seen him for months and he was surprised at how well I spoke Arabic. We talked, catching up on the events that had occurred while we had not seen each other. He told me he had feared that I would not be successful, that I would give up because of the state I was in when he left, as I had understood nothing and had felt totally lost. He said he kept making du‘a for me and asked Allah ﷻ to assist me. He said he felt Allah ﷻ had accepted his du‘a and I could see how proud he was of me. Ali left for home. Later he stayed in the Dar for about a month and finally left for personal reasons.

Ḥabīb left to travel to South Africa, and my father was able to meet him for the first time. This was thanks to Shaykh Abdurragmaan who introduced them. This was the first time Ḥabīb had left Tarim after returning from hajj, so I had more time to focus on his words and speech that I had jotted down.

Waleed, an Australian brother, was in charge of selecting a student to speak at the mawlid every Thursday. When Ḥabīb was present, a foreigner had to speak before he gave his amazing speech. A few days before Ḥabīb returned, Waleed told me I would have to speak, in Arabic or English. He said it was my choice, but said afterwards, “Remember what you came for so do not disappoint yourself”.

I had never seen a mawlid as full as the first one after al-Ḥabīb ‘Umar returned from his travels. Al-Ḥabīb returned after a long journey so people travelled from all over Yemen to witness his return. I sat in the crowd next to Waleed. I was not nervous, I was afraid. Waleed saw that I was worried and said, “You could speak in English if you want to”. When it was my turn to speak Waleed stood up ready to translate my English speech, but I told him he could sit. I walked to the microphone, said, “Bismillah al-Raḥman al-Raḥīm” and started speaking in Arabic.

I remember that day so clearly. It was the day that my Arabic moved to a whole new level after a few months of study. I stood in front of thousands in the Dar with many cameras around, streaming live on the internet. My parents, family and friends at home watched. I remembered telling only my brother about it, but, of course, he told everyone.

After the speech I sat down and felt relaxed. Ḥabīb spoke next, giving his first speech after returning from his travels. For some reason Allah ﷻ had opened up the path to Arabic for me and I thank Him ﷻ every day. As Ḥabīb spoke I understood 90% of what he said. I then understood why so many people are attached to him and start crying when he speaks. I had never experienced the lessons and sincerity that came from his words, and, for the first time, al-Ḥabīb ‘Umar’s talk made me cry.

Many people came up to me after the mawlid and congratulated me for my talk. I remember Waleed telling me that it took students years to build courage to stand in front of all the Ḥaba’ib and speak Arabic. I was the first student during a first-year program who was able to do this after only a few months of study. I did not think much of it as I was just pleased that Allah ﷻ had given me an opportunity to study His ﷻ Dīn and His ﷻ language.

When I woke up the next day things felt very different. When I spoke Arabic after my speech words started flowing and my confidence shot up to 100%. I felt on top of the world, and felt as if Arabic was my mother tongue. Ustadh Nasrullah, the Malaysian teacher who was my first teacher, heard me speak at the mawlid. He saw me again after some months had passed. He said that he was amazed at the way I spoke Arabic. He had not come across anyone who had learnt to speak and understand the language so quickly. He said that when he left for New Zealand, he thought I would not succeed.

During the last few months of my Arabic journey, I tried to benefit as much as possible from the revision period in the Dar. Ḥabīb’s son, Sayyid Ḥamid, conducted classes and many other students, as well as some of the teachers, held extra classes. I tried to attend as many classes as I could to improve my Arabic during the last few months.

As my Arabic journey was approaching its end, Ustadh Nasrullah asked me to teach his class conversational Arabic. He asked me to narrate Arabic stories or use a book from the syllabus and teach it in class. I did not want to do so, but he said that I should, it would improve my Arabic, but most importantly, it would motivate the rest of the students.

Towards the end most students prepared for exams, but I decided to take a break and did not focus on the exams. I felt that had I achieved what I came for and did not study for the exams. There were no days scheduled for exams. The exams would be held when students least expected it. I did very well in my exams even though they did not mean much to me. I achieved an average year mark of 76%.

It dawned on me that if Allah ﷻ had not put all these obstacles in my way I may never have succeeded in my journey. Sometimes in life we decide to take the easy way out. My lecturer, Ustadh ‘Umar, said, “The easy

way out when it comes to knowledge is a short cut, and short cuts lead to short memory”.

A few years after leaving Tarim I realised that we in South Africa have access to so much knowledge online, yet we do so little. We learn much less in the comfort of our homes than in uncomfortable situations. We therefore tend to hold on to what we have learned because of the hardship that we went through to obtain that knowledge.

An example I often use is that in Tarim we had no internet and very little access to mobile phones so if I needed to understand a word I had to go to the library and search for the words in the dictionaries. We had many tasks like these and at times it took me more than 10 minutes to find the words and read through all the meanings. However, after going through that process it felt like the word and the knowledge were engraved on my heart and mind. Conversely, when we are at home and we need to know something no effort goes into it. We simply type what we need to know in the search engine, and it pops up. As fast as the knowledge appears it also disappears, because we made no effort to obtain it. The lesson here is that the more effort that goes into obtaining something, the harder it will be to forget it.

So, when we find ourselves in tough situations, especially when learning anything, we should be aware that taking a short cut will lead to forgetting a short while thereafter. However, going through the correct process and doing the correct research behind it will cause us to hold on to that knowledge. We all suffer from laziness at times. May Allah ﷻ grant us the ability to always be active, remove the laziness from us, and grant us the ability to obtain and maintain knowledge. Amīn.

CHAPTER 7

A True Teacher

In Cape Town we tend to not respect our teachers enough or give them the credit they deserve. In Tarim I had many teachers. I had never experienced teachers and teaching of this quality before. In the past, in Cape Town, teaching Islamic Studies was not recognised as a profession. It is a profession today, but people still look down on it. I believe that we should give our Islamic teachers as much credit and respect as we give our schoolteachers and university lecturers.

In Tarim it is very hard to gain respect as a teacher of any science because the majority of people have studied for many years and have extensive experience in their respective fields.

I did not know whether the teacher had a university qualification, and I did not ask. The teacher did not dress like a big shaykh although he was one. He showed no signs of knowledge because he felt he was not worthy of being seen as a person of knowledge.

Take my Arabic teacher, Ustadh ‘Umar, as an example. He looked like an ordinary man. He did not bother to dress up like a big shaykh and never demanded respect. He always said that we are here to learn from each other. When I asked Ustadh ‘Umar why he did not put more effort into his dress, he said, firstly, that he was poor and secondly, that even if he had wealth, dressing in expensive clothes would make him feel superior and he would not like that. The third thing he said grabbed my attention. He said, “What is the point of me looking like a million dollars, but I don’t provide million-dollar education?” His words made me realise a lot that was wrong with our mindsets as regards teaching. If we look too good, students will expect too much from us because they expect what they see, and if we look like a million dollars, we will not be able to live up to the students’ expectations. If the students see the teacher in a lower light before he teaches and the

teacher does a good job, he would have surpassed the expectations of the students. This phenomenon seemed very interesting.

Another important factor is preparation. After returning from Tarim, I did a BA degree. When I was in the final year, I realised that preparation is very important. At the institution where I am studying, one of the lecturers has an Honours degree while the rest have Masters' and PhD qualifications. It struck me that the weight of the qualification did not matter. The teacher who had an Honours degree had only studied locally, but he reminded me of the teachers I had in Tarim. I could see the amount of work he put into preparing for his classes, and that he loved it every day and made time to see students at any time.

Many teachers in Tarim had the same way of doing things as they all came from a similar background and had had the same teachers. I had many great teachers but Ustadh 'Umar was my teacher for more than six months, so I spent the most time in his class. Ustadh 'Umar would say, "Many teachers spend more time on preparing their attire for class than their content".

Ustadh 'Umar always came to class fully prepared. Whenever he entered the class he smiled, bringing an automatic smile to each student's face, and immediately setting a good mood for the class. We realised that he had prepared the class, and we were prepared to receive his best knowledge. I always looked forward to his class. I prepared the night before the class so that I derived the maximum benefit from it.

After having attended the class, I knew that he was confident about everything he said. He opened the floor to questions and was extremely patient with all the students. He stayed after class and gave students extra time to ensure that the students understood everything. He realised that every student was not the same and that certain students did not want to ask questions in class, but needed private time, even if it was only five minutes. He gave his full attention to every student. He prepared the lesson at different levels to correspond to the different abilities of the students to understand. He realised the levels of all students were not the same.

One of the most remarkable things to me was that he prepared questions for every lesson. These were frequently asked questions over the years, so we learned from them. I remember he covered many questions in class that I would not have thought of myself. This truly impressed me and made me appreciate the impact of a well-prepared teacher on a student. It could change the student's perspective on the subject, and it could make every student an A student.

We should appreciate that all students are never the same, and that the same applies to teachers. However, a teacher chooses to become one so he

should do his best to find ways to provide the best level of education to students. I remember one teacher in Tarim mentioning to me, “If we harvest anything and do not put all our effort into it, the end result of production will be very inconsistent”. The same goes for teaching. If we do not put the best effort into our teaching the levels of students will always be inconsistent.

In Tarim it takes years of study to gain enough respect in a specific scientific field to be able to teach it. There are many knowledgeable people in the city, but very few are selected to teach. They believe that teaching has to be done at a certain level and that knowledge must be transferred by the best teachers in the best possible way. We should always respect our teachers. It is very easy to lose respect for a teacher, but we should try to find solutions and work with the teacher instead of working against him. We should always pray for our teachers irrespective of the effort that goes into the classes.

Our parents have strong and weak points, but we do not disrespect them. Likewise, we should respect our teachers, who also have strengths and weaknesses. No place or person is perfect. Institutions in different places will provide us with different pockets of knowledge. It is up to us to accept the good and overcome the bad. By doing so, we will find the best in everyone and everything. By working with our teachers and not against them, we will be able to gain the best from them.

Tarim is a special place with special people. May Allah ﷻ grant us to be like them and follow the sunnah of his Prophet ﷺ to the best of our ability.

CHAPTER 8

Ḥabīb and the Ḥaba'ib

The Ḥaba'ib are a few scholars who hold the title of al-Ḥabīb. In Tarim this is a very honourable title. If someone is called al-Ḥabīb one knows he is knowledgeable. People treat such a person with an incredible amount of respect. The title is only given to certain learned people from the bloodline of Rasūl Allah ﷺ. One's title changes from Sayyid to al-Ḥabīb after fulfilling certain criteria. Sayyid is a title given to all the Ahl al-Bayt. Some Sayyids go through a lifetime and never achieve this status. It is a status that is given to only a handful in every generation.

When I arrived in Tarim I had no idea who the Ḥaba'ib were as I only heard a little about al-Ḥabīb 'Umar from Shaykh Abdurragmaan. I did not think much about it and did not realise how important the Ḥaba'ib are to so many people around the world. The Ḥaba'ib are scholars who are very knowledgeable in all aspects of the religion. The most important aspect that stands out and that draws most people to them is their humility. They are also down-to-earth, like any ordinary person. In my time in Tarim I never heard the Ḥaba'ib say anything bad about anyone, yet people around the world say bad things about the Ḥaba'ib.

The Ḥaba'ib were always smiling, in any situation, bad or good. They were always in good moods. They would not allow worldly things to upset or divert them from the path of Allah ﷻ and his Prophet ﷺ. They are the most approachable scholars I have met. Whenever I had a question or trouble with something, I would seek guidance first from Allah ﷻ, and then from one of them. It was possible to approach them at any hour and in any situation – I think they are true servants of Islam.

The Ḥaba'ib have a unique dress code, something I rarely saw in Cape Town. In Tarim it was not common to see people dress like them. I thought that people in Tarim would be fanatical, but they were the opposite. The people of Tarim love the Ḥaba'ib, but they very rarely dress like them. The

Ḥaba'ib follow the Sunnah in their dress. Many agree that they dress the way that Rasūl Allah ﷺ himself dressed.

They cover their heads with a turban, which has a specific number of layers. According to some people in Tarim the number of layers reflects the amount of knowledge of the Ḥaba'ib. The turban covers one ear and leaves the other ear open. There is wisdom behind it, according to some people. They wear a normal thawb with a jubah over it, and an Izar under it. This is their daily dress code. It is always accompanied by a misbaḥah (prayer beads).

I found it strange that the people did not emulate the dress code as can be seen in places around the world. I realised that if I, as a student in Tarim, dressed like the Ḥaba'ib, it would be an insult to them. This is how I felt. I realised that I would never reach their level of knowledge, wisdom, and humility, or ever replicate it. Even today I will not dress like them because I feel I am not worthy in many ways. Dressing like them could also give people the wrong impression. I felt that if my teachers and so many scholars dress like normal people, not emulating the Haba'ib, what made me special when I had the least knowledge in Tarim? There is more to life than simply emulating someone. We should first see whether we are capable of filling the shoes of the person we are emulating.

I know that I am way behind the Ḥaba'ib in spirituality and in all other respects. The Ḥaba'ib have many shining qualities but the best thing they taught me is unity, which has remained with me. We will always have differences, but there is little point in arguing. Rather, we should love each other and thank Allah ﷻ that we are Muslims, thank Him ﷻ that He ﷻ has afforded us the opportunity to worship Him ﷻ on a daily basis.

I heard people say a fair number of bad things about the Ḥaba'ib before going to Tarim, but I saw the opposite and to me the Ḥaba'ib are among the best people on earth. Allah ﷻ has truly blessed them with so much knowledge, wisdom, and humility. They are heroes.

Al-Ḥabīb 'Umar is a special man. He deserves special mention because I saw so many amazing things coming from him that I am yet to see coming from any other human being.

Ḥabīb has all the traits of the other Ḥaba'ib, yet I felt there was something different about him. Shaykh Abdurragmaan tried to explain it, but it was only through spending time with him on a daily basis that I realised Ḥabīb's true level. He is highly respected by everyone in the city and students and visitors from all over the world fly in to see him. I was there and it was extraordinary to see what people went through to see him.

One night I slept in the muṣallah because the previous few nights had

been so taxing and the only way to avoid oversleeping was to sleep in the muṣallāh. Ḥabīb has the same routine every day, always busy teaching, counselling, or doing daʿwah. Allah ﷻ alone knows where he gets the energy. That night I struggled to sleep. Most students who slept in the muṣallāh were asleep while others were performing prayers at 1 a.m. I saw Ḥabīb in the muṣallāh praying. I found this hard to believe because I know that Ḥabīb follows the same routine as we do in the Dar and that he only has these few hours in which to sleep. I prayed behind him for a short time but was too tired to continue and went back to sleep. When I woke up a few hours later, Ḥabīb was still in the muṣallāh and I wondered whether he had gone home to rest or not. The wonderful part of the story is that I spent the rest of that day and night in his company and he seemed energized throughout while I was worn out. This was not the only night that Ḥabīb and so many people in Tarim lived their lives in this way. I was amazed and realised that Allah ﷻ has truly blessed him.

One day - a day I will never forget - I learned the very important lesson that knowledge is nothing without humility. Ḥabīb was late on one occasion because he had returned from a journey. As he entered to commence his rawḥah (afternoon class between Asr and Maghrib) he saw that everyone was busy with the muṣafaḥah, the traditional shaking of hands after Asr ṣalah. When he entered the students gave way, thinking he would head right to the front, but to my amazement, he took up a place in the line and walked right around and greeted every student with a smile. This was an act that showed Ḥabīb's true humility. One seldom sees a scholar walking into a gathering and greeting everyone. This shows that Ḥabīb has no sense of pride or arrogance.

I will never lose respect for the type of person he is and for what he has done for me and the ummah. People like Ḥabīb exemplify the religion of Islam. Sometimes I think that it is through the duʿas of people like him that Allah ﷻ still has mercy on the ummah. People like Ḥabīb dedicate their lives to Allah ﷻ while we worry about worldly matters, yet they keep us in their sincere duʿas. We ask Allah ﷻ to make us realise what is truly important, guide us and make us of those with true īman. Amīn.

The last meaningful event that I must mention is the day I left Tarim. I experienced problems with my visa for Oman. I recall Ali leaving a few months earlier and encountering the same problem. He was arrested at the border and missed his flight. He contacted me to warn me to ensure that all my documents were in order before I left. After a month of trying, I still had not received my visa and I was scheduled to leave. One of the Australian brothers also called Ali, a close friend of mine, was Ḥabīb's private security

person. I told him about my situation, and he told me to ask Ḥabīb to make du‘a that matters will go smoothly at the border. At first, I thought it was unnecessary, but he insisted. I went with him to Ḥabīb and he explained my situation. Al-Ḥabīb placed his hand on my heart for about 30 seconds and made a du‘a.

We arrived at the border a day later. The border patrol searched everyone and because I did not have a valid visa the bus was held back.

We prayed ṣalah in the prayer area and waited. The patrol returned a few hours later and informed me that they had received my visa from the Oman embassy. My thoughts at that time were that Allah ﷻ had saved me from missing my flight and getting arrested at the border. I had waited so long for that visa. How was it possible that they suddenly sent it? I realised that, indeed, it was from Allah ﷻ, but did Ḥabīb’s du‘a play a crucial role in me receiving the visa at the right time? I still wonder about it. It astonishes me that when we find ourselves in the company of certain people, like Ḥabīb, who are special and have reached high levels of spirituality and sincerity that we could never reach, a lot of problems that hamper us are removed.

May Allah ﷻ guide us and make us of those that He ﷻ favours. Amīn.

CHAPTER 9

The People of Tarim

Tarim is a place of much poverty. The majority of the residents live hand-to-mouth. Many of them do not know the meaning of a real job and a real education. I do not know how bad the situation was before the war, but it was bad when it came to poverty. When I arrived in Tarim I did not see much poverty and I did not understand what was happening, but as my Arabic improved, my understanding of people's situations also improved. Most of the people faced severe poverty. There were no homeless people. Those who had no place to stay found place with friends or relatives and some lived in the Dar. The Dar had a separate room for those arriving in Tarim who were running away from the dangerous parts of Yemen.

Despite the poverty I had many wonderful experiences. So many things made me grateful for the little I had at home, because it was a lot by comparison to the people of Tarim. It made me feel like my family was wealthy even though we were not. I realised that everyone is tested by Allah ﷻ in different ways. It amazed me that even though these people had very little, the older generation never complained about their situation and they were always grateful to Allah ﷻ. Even on the days they had no food, they did not miss the opportunity to thank Allah ﷻ. It is a valuable lesson for us that we should always be thankful for what we have as there are people who go through life and do not come close to the luxury we have. Imagine their status with Allah ﷻ. I felt sorry for the people of Tarim. I cannot imagine going a day without food. On occasion I offered them money or assistance; very rarely did they accept either.

One day I asked an elderly man why the people of Tarim rarely accept charity. He said, "We are afraid. If we take it, we might be depriving someone else from being assisted". I was stunned and started crying, imagining that someone might not have food but be worried about the next person who does not have any. This experience made my journey even more meaningful.

How do we measure in this regard? We have so much, but we are too selfish to give a “bread crumb” to others. The amount of gratitude they showed to Allah ﷻ despite them having next to nothing was truly humbling.

I found it odd that the mosques in the city had no chairs. In Cape Town, we have lots of chairs for those who are not able to stand while praying. In Tarim I saw people who had only one leg or one arm in many different situations praying without support, yet they were grateful and never complained.

The situation that touched me the most took place on Jumu'ah. I was praying next to an old man. He must have been over 70 years old and he had one leg and one arm. I prayed next to him and was not able to concentrate in prayer, because this old man stood like I was standing and never lost concentration. This experience was so special. In Cape Town, some people with a small pain or sickness that has no serious effect on their prayer decide to sit and pray. Here in Tarim there are people without limbs, but they are still thankful, standing for hours in tearful prayer and crying for forgiveness. How grateful should we be that life is so easy for us? We have all our limbs, and we are healthy, but we struggle to pray, and I know of some who even pray without wudu. We make many excuses, but the reality is that we do not fear Allah ﷻ and our īman is weak.

People's homes and living conditions showed their poverty. The sports grounds and restaurants were in very poor condition. There were soccer fields, but they were just large plots of land containing sand and holes. Yet no one complained. They just lived their lives. The houses were very old and simple, except those of the few Yemenis who had some wealth. The restaurants were very old. The crockery and cutlery were old and rusted. When I first arrived, I was scared to eat at a restaurant, but I adapted over time. Better restaurants opened later to cater for those students of the Dar who could afford them.

I had some of the best times in my journey while roaming the streets of Tarim and spending time with the people. I learned so much about appreciation in life and took so much advice about how to live life in real difficulty - not the difficulty we think we face every day, but the difficulty that these people experienced. It is a difficulty that cannot be understood unless you experience it yourself.

Despite all the poverty and difficulty around the whole city these people were always happy, welcoming, and smiling. They were among the humblest and yet most knowledgeable people I had met in my life. Their level of knowledge may be illustrated by my experience in a currency exchange shop. The banker spoke to me. I spoke to anyone and at the same time took the opportunity to improve my Arabic. He asked me how class was

going, and I said that it was fine, but I had difficulty understanding some fiqh terminology. He asked me what book I was studying, then went to the back of the shop and fetched the book. He closed the shop and said he would try to assist me.

To my surprise, this man taught me very well. He explained everything very simply. I asked him where he had studied, and he said he had done some prior studies. I knew that he was being humble. The next time I attended the fiqh class I understood everything that the banker taught me. The teacher was surprised as I was able to assist him to explain the terminology during class. He asked where I had learned it because the way I was taught was similar to the way that he understood it. I told him it was the man at the exchange shop.

Our fiqh teacher was Shaykh Munīr Tamīmī. He was known at the time to be one of the greatest fiqh teachers in the valley of Tarim. He told me that the banker is one of the most knowledgeable people in fiqh in Tarim, and that he had taught him (Shaykh Munīr) as well as many of the teachers who taught in the Dar. I was shocked to hear that and realised that the best teachers are not even teaching in the Dar.

Shaykh Munīr Tamīmī told us to never underestimate anyone's knowledge. He said that we judge people's knowledge based on their degrees and education, but we do not realise that some people have been through many practical experiences in life. They are not "book smart", but they have been through struggles which have taught them many lessons. This could be why they are more knowledgeable than most people, but they do not realise it. He said that we are quick to take advice from those who claim to be learned, but we forget that those "people who have travelled the journey of life, such as our parents and grandparents, have the answers and wisdom that we need to achieve whatever we want".

I realised that I should not underestimate anyone on the outside of the Dar. Whenever I had the opportunity I tried to benefit as much as I could from everyone around me and found that the people on the streets of Tarim had so much knowledge, but they were so humble. They made me realise the reality that the more knowledge we obtain, the more we realise that we know very little, and that we learn something new every day. This should be a humbling lesson for us, making us realise we will never know everything. Only Allah ﷻ is the All-Knowing, so how dare we even show even the slightest bit of arrogance?

This experience reminded me so much of our old shuyūkh and the older generation of people in Cape Town. We have a history of saints, such as Shaykh Yusuf from Makassar in Indonesia and Tuan Guru. Shaykh Yusuf

took great benefit from many scholars of Hadramaut and brought these knowledgeable ways to the Cape. The Shuyūkh, like Shaykh Yusuf, Tuan Guru, Tuan Nurul Mubeen, Imam al-Haddad and many more, deserve credit. However, we tend to forget those brothers who spent so much time upholding the dhikr - they are true champions. The people of Tarim reminded me so much of those brothers in Cape Town who would recite the Ratib al-Haddad every week without fail, and sometimes even daily. We do not realise how much barakah we have received through this practice. I find it ironic that those who travel to Tarim have such respect for its people and their upkeep of spiritual practices, yet hold our local elders in the same esteem. We should not forget that we have such people in Cape Town, but we tend to not respect them in the same way. I believe we owe them a debt of gratitude for preserving our religion.

Nowadays, everyone who dresses or acts a certain way, or who follows a certain ṭarīqah, is regarded as a sufi. There are many such people in the world, yet the people of Tarim are the complete opposite - no dress code, no long beards, and no parading their names in public. They are knowledgeable, show true humility and true fear of Allah ﷻ. So many of our brothers in the Cape live the same kind of lifestyle as the people of Tarim, and they also have true humility and fear of Allah ﷻ. However, this is fading away here, and it is sad.

I learned many lessons from these people, the most important of which is wisdom. No matter how many books we read and how many podcasts we listen to, true wisdom can only be achieved through life experiences and the will of Allah ﷻ. We ask Allah ﷻ to grant us true wisdom and make us appreciate what we have, whether it be our little knowledge or wealth. We ask Allah ﷻ to make us aware that He ﷻ is the true King and that we are nothing in this world, but slaves of Allah ﷻ like all others. We ask Him ﷻ to make us realise that we are not more special than others, and that we should never feel more special than others. We also ask Him ﷻ to make us realise the importance of worshipping Him ﷻ.

We ask Allah Almighty to guide us like He ﷻ has guided those before us and to make us realise that He ﷻ is the Most Compassionate. We ask Allah ﷻ to grant us all that is good for us in this world and to remove all that is bad. I heard a brother recite this du'a everyday in Tarim. He lived in real poverty, but he made du'a for all of us. May Allah ﷻ protect us and remove all pride from our hearts, in sha' Allah.

CHAPTER 10

Spiritual Experiences

My family had a balanced approach to religion while I was being raised. My father did not over-emphasise the spiritual side of the religion although he was raised in a family who emphasised spirituality. He was raised in a home with an Indian background, and his family had (and continue to have) their own style of dhikr. I felt uncomfortable with certain aspects of those practices. This played a role in my decision to further my studies in the Islamic sciences.

My mother was raised differently. She was from a Cape Malay background. Her mother is a direct descendant of Tuan Guru and Abubaker Effendi, and her father was the brother of Imam Abdullah Haroon. So, my mother comes from a very religious background, from a history of great scholars, who also had many spiritual practices that they shared with the community.

I attended many Qur'an Khatms on Thursdays and Sundays, first with Muallim Goolam, who was an early madrasah teacher of mine, and then for the most part with Haji Ebrahim Kenny and his sons. This continued regularly for a long time. When someone in the community passed away, they would call upon us to do the completion of the Qur'an.

While my siblings and I were growing up we could not ask our parents what was right and wrong in regard to the community's spiritual practices. Even though both parents come from traditional Islamic backgrounds, they were unable to explain why certain things were practiced and they had no in-depth knowledge of the Islamic sciences. I found some practices strange and although I attended, I did not get too involved.

Before I left for Tarim, many of my friends expressed fears about me going. Some of them were narrow-minded about aspects of the religion. I was open-minded and did not take their talk too seriously because I knew that they spoke without knowledge. Some provided proof. Sadly, they inter-

preted it incorrectly. When I left for Tarim my friends said many bad things about the place, about al-Ḥabīb Umar and about the rest of the Ḥaba'ib, but I ignored them and followed my own plans. I wanted to experience for myself what the Ḥaba'ib did and how they did it.

When I arrived in Tarim everything about the place was very new to me and I adapted over time. But it took me some time to adapt to the spiritual aspects and practices. The program was built around these practices and as students living in the Dar we had to attend. Fortunately, I had experience of attending the dhikr practices of my parents' families. In Tarim the adhkar were not very different. They took place more regularly, lasted longer and involved more recitation.

In addition to looking at proofs for each spiritual practice, I put them into a logical context. I discovered that what they were doing did not seem wrong at all, as the people at home had said. I started to enjoy the spiritual practices so much and found real benefit in them. I realised that people make the mistake of judging others but not themselves. Irrespective of whether the Ḥaba'ib were doing right or wrong, judging another reflects badly on the one who judges. We do many things wrong spiritually, but we judge other people's spiritual practices. Spiritual practices not only include adhkar, but also everything that we do in life, from judging to mistreating our employees, to the way we speak to people – all of these have an impact on us spiritually.

After spending so much time in the gatherings and speaking to different people about their view of the practices, I realised that everyone has their own troubles and issues. For some people, these practices become a place of hope, a place where they forget about every struggle or trouble, and it motivates them when they realise that everyone sitting in the gathering has problems too. If Allah ﷻ were to judge any of us on actions and intentions in a spiritual gathering, it would make a lot more sense than sitting with a group of people judging and speaking badly about people doing these spiritual practices. We know what is right and wrong for our own spirituality. If one disagrees with others, it is better to ignore their utterances and move on as this avoids anger, bad-mouthing and arguments.

I realised that what I thought, will always be just my opinion because the Ḥaba'ib have very deep knowledge of all the sciences. How could I ever compare to them or even think of judging anything they did? I respected them and their practices, and this made me a better person.

We are too opinionated. We think everything we do or say is right, but we do not realise how much wrong we do to ourselves. I realised that a key aspect of the Ḥaba'ib's spirituality is that even though they are judged

by many people, they do not do the same. I did not ever hear them speak badly about anyone for the year that I studied with them. I did not hear them mention the name of anyone except that good was coming from their mouths. This is something we should try and incorporate into our lives.

I felt spiritually uplifted after the mawlid every Thursday. It was a gathering where people were smiling and embracing everyone, no matter the colour of the person or where they were from. Everyone was happy and felt good. Shaykh Faheem advised me to take advantage of these moments and make lots of du'a. I followed his advice. I made du'a for myself, but more for my mother and father as well as for success in their business. I asked Allah ﷻ almost every Thursday at the same time that Ḥabīb was making his final du'a. At this point everyone cried. It was an emotionally touching du'a because anyone who was there and understood Ḥabīb would certainly cry too. So my du'a was very specific - I asked Allah ﷻ to lift the financial burden off my parents a little bit as they did not need to look after me anymore. The money people gave me and that I was getting from my brother and some of my father's friends was enough for me. I wanted things to be much easier for my parents and I asked this of Allah ﷻ every week. I did not expect anything for myself because I felt I was not deserving of anything from Allah ﷻ, but I asked anyway as He ﷻ is the All-Merciful.

Soon thereafter my brother told me that over the last couple of months my mom's business had picked up steadily. I realised that all the sacrifices my parents had made over the years were bearing fruit. Allah ﷻ has blessed them, alhamdulillah. It also made me think that if the spiritual practices of my parents' families were bad in the eyes of Allah ﷻ, how could He ﷻ have accepted my du'as. I cannot claim that it was my du'a alone that was accepted, but all of ours as a family, and Allah ﷻ knows best. If these practices were bad how is it that I felt amazing and spiritually uplifted after attending them? At times, logical thought can save us from unnecessary wrongs.

I understood then that the feeling upon leaving a spiritual gathering is so much better than the feeling upon leaving a group of people speaking ill of others. So, applying logical thinking, where is shayṭan? At which gathering? This is so simple, yet we overthink everything. I was part of many spiritual experiences at the Dar - too many to recount in this book.

Imam al-Ḥaddad

I remember learning from Shaykh Abdurragmaan that Islam in Cape Town had been influenced by the people of Tarim in a way that I had not realised. Islam was brought to the Cape by Shaykh Yusuf who is buried in Macassar,

Cape Town, and every year people celebrate his teachings and legacy over a particular weekend. I only found out in Tarim that he was very famous among the Indonesian students. To my astonishment, he had studied with one of the great scholars of Tarim, Imam al-Ḥaddad. He had been blind but had great influence. He was very spiritual and knowledgeable. Not a day went by without his name being mentioned in the Dar. Shaykh Yusuf was his student and learned various sciences from him, the most prominent of which is tasawwuf (sufi or Islamic mysticism). People of Cape Town do not realise that Shaykh Yusuf practiced in the Cape exactly what the people of Tarim practice today. That is why I mentioned earlier that so many of our older generation resemble the people of Tarim so much.

I was fortunate enough to visit the home, masjid and grave of the pious imam, Abdullah bin Alawi al-Haddad. Many spiritual practises in Tarim were held in honour of him. There were gatherings at the masjid named after him, at his home and even at the grave. I attended all the gatherings. Our bus of students was among the first to arrive and I remember sitting very close to the front of the grave and seeing that almost all the Ḥaba'ib of Tarim were present. After about an hour everybody started crying and became immersed in the adhkar. After a long while, al-Ḥabīb 'Umar got up, gave a lecture and made a very long du'a. Ḥabīb was in tears, and everyone else was too. This was a very unsettling experience as I did not want to be accused of grave worshipping. However, in his du'a he appealed to Allah ﷻ and not to the grave of the imam and that is very important for everyone to know. He asked Allah ﷻ to bless the city with rain through the barakah of Imam al-Ḥaddad and the rest of the pious people in Zanbal (the graveyard in Tarim). He continued with the du'a for another ten minutes and I still felt uncomfortable when he finished. Strikingly, as the gathering finished, the rain started pouring down and I was truly amazed. To everyone else it seemed normal, but to me this was something I have never experienced before. I heard people speak about how bad grave worship is, but this gathering was not grave worship at all. It was the complete opposite. I felt uncomfortable because of what I had heard before about this topic. However, subḥana Allah, this was something I could not understand and probably never will. It was truly a spiritual experience. It touched me so much and led me to the understanding that certain people, dead or alive, have a status with Allah ﷻ that, though we try, we will never understand.

Nabi Hud

The study program in Tarim included visits to many places, tombs of the Awliya' and various masajid. The visit to Nabi Hud's grave stood out because it was overwhelming. I had heard stories of the prophets, but there I was actually present at the grave of one of them. I was amazed at the size of the grave. It was massive in length. Nabi Hud was buried in a small village in the mountains of Haḍramawt. There are houses, but no one lives in them. People from Tarim and all over Yemen own property there and visit, but the Dar has its own visits. There is also an annual visit when thousands of people from the city camp there for five days.

The hardest part of this visit was the program as it was very intense over the five days. We had almost no sleep. We lived in a hostel belonging to the Dar, which was dusty and very hot at times and the fans did not work. Many events took place outside the hostel, but as students we were restricted from attending them. Most of the Ḥaba'ib's followers attended this annual event, and people travelled there specifically to attend it. Shaykh Abdurragmaan and Shaykh Dilawer also attended. Shaykh Abdurragmaan was one of the few people who gave a speech at the final gathering, which was massive. Ḥabīb has a soft spot for him because whenever he came to Tarim, Ḥabīb always gave him an opportunity to address the people of Tarim.

This journey caused me to become very broken, more than any other aspect of my stay in Tarim. The retreat was isolated from everything, the rules were strict, and those in charge watched everything we did. It felt like primary school and a prison at the same time. The toilets were in the worst condition I had ever seen in my life. They were cubicles with wooden doors and cement walls. The toilet was very small and compact. The worst was that we had to shower in those same conditions. This was very tough. It was one of the hardest parts of my travels.

The spiritual side of this retreat – sitting next to the grave of Nabi Hud - was worth all these struggles. After what had happened at the grave of Imam al-Ḥaddad, I was more comfortable with what was happening. I sat there with a clear mind. I had a spiritual feeling that I still cannot explain today. It was a moment that I will look back on for the rest of my life and see as really spiritually uplifting. While sitting there I cried because I realised that if these living conditions were so hard for me, imagine what it was like for Nabi Hud who had lived in that same area thousands of years ago. It must have been thousands of times worse. So how could I complain? I realised the wisdom behind what the Dar was doing. It was to enable us to realise and appreciate those who came before us and to appreciate the easy lives

that we live. We complain about small things in life, but if we think about what we have, our lives are so much easier than the lives of those before us. We complain and we are ungrateful.

These spiritual experiences had a big impact on me and taught me many lessons that assist me today in many ways after having left Tarim several years ago.

Overall, in my time at Dar al-Mustafa there were so many spiritual events that I lost count, but I truly benefited from all of them. Attending with an open mind was the best choice I had made as this had a big impact on my spirituality. We underestimate the fact that being open-minded and thinking can cause us to grow and become much better people.

One of the mawlid gatherings that took place just before I left the Dar was the longest gathering that I had ever attended in my life. It started at 6 a.m. and we sat for a very long time. I lost concentration as I had pain in my back and legs and there were no walls to lean on for support. Eventually, when it was time to leave, I stood up and immediately fell back down as my legs were so shaky. The heat may have played a part too, but it felt like my legs were about to fall off. After a while I got the strength to get up and leave. I was angry and thought, "What is the significance of this?" As I left the masjid, I saw a man with one leg. He looked at me and smiled. This made me feel so ashamed of my thoughts as I was so ungrateful for what was happening, and this man had been sitting for hours with one leg. May Allah ﷻ protect us and allow us wisdom to understand all the tests that He ﷻ puts us through. I realised that I needed to become healthier, get back into training and look after my body. The Yemenis are able to withstand these long events, not only because of their love for the dīn and their humility, but because they are genuinely healthy and conditioned.

I left that gathering, like many others, having learned many lessons, both practical and spiritual. I thought that sometimes these gatherings had no significance, but when we reflect on what happened at them, we will truly see the lessons that we can derive from them, and most of the time they will be spiritually uplifting.

We ask Allah ﷻ to uplift all of us spiritually. Amin.

Bedouin life

I had an experience that showed me how we should truly thank Allah ﷻ for what He ﷻ has given us. I was travelling to the outskirts of Tarim and came across an elderly Bedouin man searching for water. I tried to communicate with him, but he did not understand the formal Arabic. He spoke a

very strong slang of which I understood very little. I went with him on his way back into the desert. He invited me into his tent. I sat down and there were a few other Bedouins around. They offered me some water and they had snacks including dates. I stayed with them for a while, played dominos and had a good time. I communicated with them, but they understood very little. I found that these men did not know much about Islam. I was astounded. This was a Muslim state but there are people who know almost nothing about Islam. It was an eye-opener for me, and it made me realise that Allah ﷻ has truly blessed us and that we should appreciate and be grateful for His favours.

These people live isolated from other people. They do not know of the existence of a god, they speak a language that many do not understand, they cannot read the Qur'an and do not know about Allah ﷻ and his Prophet ﷺ. However, they are humble and happy with what has been granted to them, whereas we complain day in and day out about things in our lives. They live in tents, have no air conditioning or fans and no access to water. I felt embarrassed because I know all the favours Allah ﷻ has bestowed upon me, but I complain, like most of us. We know that in Islam patience is the foundation of everything, yet it seems the more we learn about patience the less we have. But these people who have almost nothing in this world, no material gain, are content. This opened my eyes and made me realise that we should show so much gratitude to Allah ﷻ for granting us a guide (a way of life and understanding of our purpose). There are people who have no clue why they exist. We ask Allah ﷻ to make us of those who have true appreciation for Allah ﷻ, our Lord, the Lord of the Worlds.

CHAPTER 11

Security in a War Zone

The journey to Tarim was always going to be a security risk, especially after what had happened to Ali at the border, and I did not know what to expect. Within Yemen, we moved a lot through the province of Hadramaut where we saw the tombs of great scholars of the past, which had been bombed, and several other places that were demolished by bombings. There were checkpoints that were scary. The soldiers were heavily armed and the way they spoke was very rough and it was an Arabic dialect that sounded like our Afrikaans dialect back home. I felt safe even though it was a war zone. I did not experience anything bad, but I saw the bad effects of what the bombings had caused. Many people had lost so much and there was no assistance for them. It made me feel very sad.

One of my close friends, Abdullah from America, had bad experiences. He told me how he had been kidnapped on his journey to Tarim. He had travelled alone and had no background of the Arabic language upon his arrival from Oman by bus. He found himself in a village not too far from Tarim, but he was lost and did not know how far he was from the Dar at that time. Abdullah could not read Arabic so he could not read the sign boards. He met a taxi and asked the driver if he knew where Tarim was. To Abdullah's surprise, the driver spoke English and he was an American as well. He told Abdullah that he would transport him to Tarim. Abdullah trusted him and went with him. Unfortunately, Abdullah realised that he had been kidnapped when they arrived at a masjid that was not Dar al-Mustafa. He was forced to stay there for a week. They did not hurt him but tried to brainwash him into doing certain things. However, he made sure he did not fall for their trickery.

He asked one of the guards if he could charge his phone and the guard permitted him to do so. A few moments after he had charged it, he received a call from the Dar. Someone spoke to him in English and he quickly said

that he had been kidnapped, but before he could give his location the guard took his phone and ended the call. People from the Dar rescued him a few hours later. He wondered how they knew where he was held. I think the Dar had people in place to handle incidents such as these. I found it strange that the leader of the group which had kidnapped Abdullah was American. Abdullah said they had tried to force him to stay, but to avoid trouble they let him go with the people sent by the Dar. In hindsight, there were security risks, but I was cautious and did not take them too seriously. My goal was more important and regardless of what was going on around me, I kept focussing on the reasons I had come.

Tarim was probably the safest place I have ever lived. I never saw or heard about a robbery or killing or anything criminal. Children could walk alone at night and no one harmed them. I was surprised that I felt safe in a country riven by civil war.

CHAPTER 12

How to Learn Arabic

I would say most Muslims really desire to learn Arabic. Over the years I have seen Muslim people strive towards understanding the Qur'an, hadith, and other aspects of Islam. Many schools in Cape Town offer courses for the community. Some are traditional institutions, and some are accredited institutions. For many years, people have been seeking the tools to try to understand the language by learning at these institutions and it is sad to see that the results could be better. Most people give up because Arabic seems tough. Some complete the course but struggle to grasp the language. Some of the people who complete the courses are not honest with themselves, as they claim to have a strong understanding of the language which is not true most of the time. Institutions continue with the same curriculum and give new students hope that they could be like those who have completed before them. I feel that these programs need to be re-examined and re-designed. We should acknowledge that these programs work for some, and that perhaps we need more creative and innovative methods for others.

The curriculum concentrates on grammar at the expense of oral communication skills. This is the case in most countries. In Tarim, I realised that this method does not work for me as I am not very good at theory and do not enjoy it. As I mentioned above, I designed my own way of learning the language. In Cape Town we do not use the method I used.

Teachers of the Arabic language tell their students that grammar is the most important part of the language and that the best way is to learn grammar first so one can read and understand. I disagree with this. In Tarim I did the opposite. I concentrated on speaking and memorising words and I read whatever I could to understand and this worked for me. I feel strongly that this method may work for most people.

A question I ask myself is, how does a baby pick up a language? He does so by listening, memorising and then speaking. As we grow up, we start

speaking better because we start understanding how to formalise grammar. Why should we not use the same method for adults? We are all babies in the Arabic language. No matter how much we dwell on grammar, if we do not understand the words in the book, how can we understand what we are reading? And if we cannot speak and form our own sentences, how can we understand the speech of others?

If we think logically, we will realise that the Qur'an and hadith are made up of speech. Quranic speech is the speech of Allah ﷻ and the speech in hadith is the speech of His ﷺ Messenger ﷺ. Yes, grammar is important. But I believe that the more we emphasise speech, the more easily our grammar will fall into place. Once we have a very good background, I think just basic grammar will be good, but there should be more focus on speech and understanding words. If we do this, we will make progress in the language. A focus on grammar is not suitable for our local people, but it is good for students doing Advanced Arabic. We should make learning the language fun instead of making it as boring as some find a mathematics class.

Let us humble ourselves and realise that we are and will always be babies in this language. We should try other ways of learning as there is not only one way. I am not saying my way is better, but if I had followed the traditional way, I would probably have given up studying Arabic a long time ago.

I know that I have a long way to go in the language, but the important thing I realised is that it is not possible to perfect Arabic. It has humbled me, as every day I still learn a new word. The grammar will always be around. We will learn it and even forget the rulings, but when we speak and make a mistake, and someone corrects us we will not repeat that mistake. Speaking and having our mistakes corrected will enable us to learn the rules of grammar without realising it. This has happened to me on many occasions. I still make grammatical mistakes, but this does not deter me because I understand what I am reading. I understand the context of what is being said and that comes with practicing and understanding speech and memorising words and rewriting them in sentences.

Arabic is not tough. I feel it is made hard by the way it is taught and the approach that is used. My sincere desire is that we can make changes in the near future and have Muslim communities that are able to communicate in Arabic like the Prophet ﷺ did with his fellow ṣaḥābah ﷺ. We ask Allah ﷻ to grant us the ability to understand his speech (Qur'an) and the words of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

I am doing an experiment with my nephew who is one year and a few months old. I let him view Arabic videos and movies and I can see that he already reacts to what is being said. When I was in Yemen, a Sri Lankan

loaded Kung Fu Panda onto my phone. It was a dubbed Arabic version. He advised me to watch it and it helped me. The speech was eloquent and clear. I derived so much benefit from it, it was unbelievable. We should realise that the majority of the Qur'an is also told in the form of stories. This may sound strange, but I believe we can use many western practices, like videos and movies, to our advantage as Muslims, as I am doing with my nephew.

It may be impossible to keep our little ones away from cartoons, but if we find a way to let them watch in Arabic, this will benefit them, and they will grow up with a language that we all desire to know and understand. Let us try to be open-minded and use different ways to assist our communities and truly succeed in understanding the Arabic language. Allah ﷻ and his Prophet ﷺ know best.

CHAPTER 13

Gems of Tarim

I could mention so many things about the city that makes it special. Tarim has a rich history of scholarship. The scholars, both past and present, represent a very rare type of scholarship. Allah ﷻ has truly blessed them with their knowledge, humility and approach to life. Their way of being and doing things is very, very special, but I believe that their main gem is unity. I have never experienced unity amongst scholars like I did in Tarim. I met many scholars in Tarim who have different opinions on many things that the leaders do, but they keep silent, saying they are not knowledgeable enough to be making the decisions. They disagree, but do not dispute or fight amongst each other. I have never seen unity of the degree that exists in Tarim.

The experience of different cultures is also very special. No one living in the Dar made anyone else feel out of place, regardless of who they were. I was the only South African in the Dar, but not once did it feel that way. Everyone embraced me as their own and I was always welcomed by everyone. I spend my first Eid away from my family in Tarim. I felt alone as it was the beginning of my journey, I did not know anyone and did not have any friends. Hudayfa, my roommate, told his brother to bring me to a function attended by the brothers from Africa. I went and have had an amazing bond with the African brothers ever since. Tarim has many gems and one of them most certainly is the humility of the people of the city. It rubs off on everyone. Tarim makes one change without realising, and this amazed me. I was not a soft and compassionate person, but Tarim changed me and softened my heart. Tarim has rubbed off on many around the world and will continue doing so, *InshAllah*.

Conclusion

As Muslims we understand that everything that happens in life is maktūb (already written). Some scholars say we cannot change our fate, while others say it is possible to do so. There are various opinions on this topic, but we should understand that Allah ﷻ has granted us minds with which to think and to seek advice from people around us. Even though things have been written for us, we still need to make decisions based on advice from others and on logical decision-making.

Things may be maktūb, but we do not know what they are, so we should always try to understand that decision-making is a very important part of our lives. Before we make any decision, we should first seek the assistance of Allah ﷻ and then try to seek the assistance of others if necessary. As we know, only Allah ﷻ knows the outcome of every decision, so who better to ask than Allah ﷻ?

We must also always bear in mind that Allah ﷻ will never burden us with something we cannot handle. My life inside the Dar has taught me so much about dealing with struggle. The past three years of my life was possibly the best time for me financially because Allah ﷻ granted me so much more rizq than I had in the past. I didn't realise then, but I do now, that obtaining unnecessary material things in this world and accumulating more will only make us want more and more, and this distances us from our real purpose, which is to please Allah ﷻ and his Prophet ﷺ. We should try to focus less on worldly gains, because what will happen if we die tomorrow? We don't know when death is written for us.

We should all try to avoid judging others. I have seen many people judge others, and I was disappointed that scholars I knew and trusted also did so. Judging others can easily creep into our ways, so we must try to remove it from our conversations. We are all sinners and each one of us makes mistakes, so let's try not to judge, as Allah ﷻ is the only true Judge of all.

Teaching is an amanah (a trust), so when we take it on, we should always try to do it to the best of our ability. As a teacher the best way is to

put yourself in the student's shoes, and then to ask yourself if you would be happy with the way you are teaching.

Many people judge others by their appearance. In Tarim I learned to never judge by appearance, as the majority of those people who dressed in the cheapest clothing and had no flashy thawbs or clothes were of the most knowledge people in the city. We should be aware that sometimes a flashy appearance can lead us to a path of arrogance.

Seeking knowledge is of the utmost importance in our religion. We should understand that Islam covers all areas of knowledge. As a Muslim community, we should improve our knowledge. While I was growing up, I always thought Islam taught us about worship, but over the past few years I have learned that Islam covers all areas of knowledge. So, it is up to us to expose our community to these areas of knowledge. Let them see Islam not only as worship, but also as a religion that is truly a way of life that covers every situation in life.

We ask Allah ﷻ to grant us all the understanding of Islam, and to follow Him ﷻ and his Prophet ﷺ to the best of our ability. We ask Allah ﷻ to make us of those whom He ﷻ protects from sin, and to allow us to be on the straight path. And we ask Allah ﷻ to let our final words be "*la ilaha illa Allah Muhammad al-rasulullah ﷺ*".

