

# A Yazidi Speaks to the Narayver Synagogue in Canada

by Mirza Ismail (October 2016)



## Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning. My name is Mirza Ismail. I am a Yazidi. I was born and raised in what is now called Iraq. But you and I know that the land of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers has only been called Iraq during the last one hundred years. Before that it was once called Mesopotamia, Assyria, or Babylonia, or Chaldea, or Akkad or in the earliest of times, Sumeria. In one of those cities, Ur of the Chaldees, as it is written in the Bible, there arose a man called Abraham, who eventually went to the land of Israel and who is the genetic ancestor of many of the people in this audience. If he is not the genetic ancestor of some of you, then he is the spiritual father of all of you as he was the first Jew.

Historians tell us that there have been Jews in Iraq for more than 2500 years. Of course there was the Babylonian captivity, but even after the Jews returned to the land of Israel during the reign of the Persian King Cyrus, a great and

thriving Jewish community stayed behind in Babylon. That is where your people developed the Babylonian Talmud which is today studied around the world and which often deals with the rights and obligations of Jewish farmers, a long time ago, on the banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates, not far from where I was born.

Under the non-Islamic rulers of Iraq, the Jews prospered. But 1300 hundred years ago when the Arab Muslims conquered Iraq, the Jews became second class citizens, unequal in the eyes of the Sharia law of Islam. They became Dhimmi. At times they were left alone and at times persecuted and killed or forced to convert to Islam at the point of a sword, just like the Yazidi.

On June 1–2, 1941, just after the British forces won the Anglo-Iraqi war, the Muslim inhabitants of Baghdad carried out a classic pogrom against the Jews. This was just after the fall of the pro-Nazi government of Rashid Ali who the British had opposed militarily. As the majority of Baghdadis had supported this ally of the Nazis, in revenge, local people killed 180 Jews and injured 1,000. Many Jewish businesses were looted and 900 Jewish homes destroyed. The attack happened during your holiday of Shavuot. This event is called the Farhud.

We should therefore not be surprised that most Iraqi Jews moved to Israel in 1948 for the Farhud was just one of a series of persecutions that they had experienced over the centuries. Almost all of the Jews of my grandparent's neighbourhood in Kurdistan in northern Iraq moved to Israel, where they now live in the only democracy in the Middle East. They are the lucky Iraqis. *We* are the unlucky ones. And so let me tell you a little bit about the Yazidi.

Iraq is really three countries. The south is a land of Shia Arabs, the centre is a land of Sunni Arabs and the north is a land of mixed Shia and Sunni Kurds who live in the mountains. The Yazidi have been in Kurdistan for at least three thousand years. We are not Muslims but we are indigenous monotheists. Like the Druze of Syria and Lebanon, we have secret scriptures that only our priests know about. We lived in peace among the Jews and Christians of Kurdistan for more than a thousand years, but the Muslims have always treated us as expendable infidels. They have persecuted us, killing the men and boys and enslaving our women.

I am sure that those of you who follow the news know that ISIL has attacked many

Yazidi villages, massacred the men and boys and taken our women into slavery, where they are sold and raped repeatedly. When ISIL attacked the Yazidi homeland in the Sinjar Mountains in August of 2014, they captured five thousand women. Thousands of them are still slaves of ISIL. Those of us who have escaped are waiting and hoping for Canada and the USA to destroy ISIL and redeem the Yazidi, but that has not happened yet.

The persecution of the Yazidi by ISIL is not a new phenomenon. In 1892, the British traveler Oswald Hutton Parry went to Iraq where he witnessed a massacre of Yazidi carried out in the name of Jihad. I quote from his book verbatim:

*[W]orst of all was what happened to those who refused to change their faith. The men were cruelly tortured, and killed, the women taken away, outraged, or killed. One [Yazidi] Sheikh was cut into many pieces and thrown over a rock; another ground like corn between two millstones. The women were at the mercy of the soldiers. Some fled, and to escape dishonor cast themselves from a high rock and were slain...[A] number of young girls were hidden near the olive groves, in some long grass; savagely fire [was] set all around, and with screams too fearful to hear, they were all burned to death. A young girl, soon to be a mother, was pursued to the Syrian church, where the priest gave her refuge. The soldiers found her, and having committed unspeakable things, killed her near the sanctuary. The Kurds of the mountains, encouraged by these things, came down, and added much cruelty and outrage to what was already done.*

By the way, this was done by the Ottomans in Iraq, when your grandparents were escaping pogroms in Eastern Europe and when the Jews of the Islamic world were often treated in a similar way. And today ISIL continues what was done to the Yazidi in 19th century Iraq. Nothing has changed. The only difference is with modern guns and communications equipment, it all happens faster.

People ask me, "Why do the Muslims hate the Yazidi so much?" I answer because the Yazidi do not hate. There is no hatred of Jews or Christians in our religion. We lived in peace with our Jewish neighbours for centuries. We admire Israel. Many Yazidi have volunteered to fight in the Israeli Defense Forces.

And so, here I am today, in a Jewish synagogue, in Canada, speaking to a people who share with us a common history of persecution in Iraq. I am here to ask your

help because Jews understand what it is to be faced with a totalitarian threat of annihilation. You faced genocide by the Nazis, and we are facing genocide by Islamist Jihadis. For more than a year, we have been working with The Mozuud Freedom Foundation and many Jewish volunteers to bring Yazidi refugees to Canada, to re-unite them with their Yazidi families here, and to lobby the Canadian government to open its doors to the Yazidi the way it should have opened its doors to Jews fleeing Europe in 1939. Then, the Prime Minister of Canada said that “None is too many” to let in, and today I feel the present government of Canada is saying “One is too many.”

We need your help. We need donations to be given to Project Abraham, our joint project with The Mozuud Freedom Foundation (<https://gogetfunding.com/save-yazidis-from-genocide/>), and we need the Jewish community to unite behind us for the Yazidi have always been friends of the Jewish people and the State of Israel.

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**Mirza Ismail** is a Yazidi who escaped Iraq on foot, to cross into the then quiet Syrian border and from there he eventually was allowed to come to Canada, many years back. Since then he has become the Founder and Chairman of the Yezidi Human Rights Organization-International. During the last few years. He has returned to Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan many times to help the Yazidi who are trapped there and, he has lobbied tirelessly in Europe, Canada and America on behalf of the Yazidi. Mirza now lives in the GTA (Greater Toronto Area) with his wife who arrived from Iraq one month ago. He was born in Sinjar, Ninevah, Iraq, where two summers ago thousands of Yazidis were killed and thousands of Yazidi women were captured and enslaved by ISIL. Mirza is a graduate of Fanshawe College in London, Ontario. He has travelled all over the world, speaking with government officials, media, and organizations about the plight of the Yezidi People and other minorities suffering at the hands of ISIL. Mirza is also an expert on the Yazidi religion.

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