

Good Neighbors Should Not Forget One Another"

From Geoffrey Clarfield

If this be so, our God whom we serve, is able to deliver from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. – Daniel 3:17

(The Book of Daniel is one of the Old Testament books written in the Aramaic language, the lingua franca of the Jews of Kurdistan until the early 1950s).

In 2014 the army of the latest version of Jihad in Iraq and Syria under the name of ISIS (the names keep changing in the alphabet soup of Islamic Jihadi groups), decided that it was time to forcibly convert, or finally eliminate (genocide in the active sense of the word) one of the most ancient groups of Iraqi Kurdistan's non-Moslem indigenous monotheists, the Yazidi, a people who have lived in the area for thousands of years.

The forces of ISIS were well organized, well financed, and well-armed. After the Iraqi government and the Kurdish Regional Government's military withdrew from northern Iraq (before the ISIS onslaught) ISIS forces would indiscriminately bomb a Yazidi village, then enter and randomly kill the unarmed and undefended men, women, and children. Then they would separate the men and women in occupied schools and public buildings and then order the men to convert to Islam at gunpoint.

When they did not, thousands of Yazidi men were immediately slaughtered by firing squad, mimicking the Einsatzgruppen of the Nazis and their local Ukrainian allies during the "Holocaust by Bullets," in the early years of WWII. Together,

they murdered more than one million innocent Jewish men, women, and children.

In the Yazidi case the women were often first raped, passed around and then sold into slavery and distributed across the Islamic world as far away as Saudi Arabia and Gaza. Their surviving male children were sent off to Jihadi training camps.



Yazidi Children

Many of these Yazidi women and children languish in refugees camps some still under the immediate authority of their former captors knowing well

that if they speak out, they can be killed.

By the time allied forces, led by a reluctant US under President Obama finally defeated ISIS in 2018 it is thought that 35,000 Yazidi men may have been slaughtered and 7,000 women sold into slavery, of whom only about half have been redeemed after multiple rapes and beatings. Mass graves of slaughtered Yazidi are regularly being discovered across northern Iraq. The UN makes a lot of noise about them but was silent and inactive when it was all happening.

Meanwhile Yazidi have lost houses, farms, and livelihoods in their home area of northern Iraq in the heartland of the Sinjar mountains. Kurdish and Arab Muslim neighbors have occupied their lands and houses and replaced their businesses.

Bear with me as I tell you the story of how I became a supporter of the Yazidi cause and why.

Just after this organized mass slaughter and enslavement of the Yazidi by ISIS that began in 2014 and who intended to demoralize and destroy them, we must remember that Canada, in 2015 officially declared war on ISIS in Iraq and Syria since 2015.

You can read about "Operation Impact" on the Canadian Forces web site but you can be sure that our forces have not lifted a finger to help the Yazidis in Iraq, who are still persecuted by the Iraqi government as well as by various Islamic terror groups that survived the US campaign against ISIS that ended in 2018. But surprise, surprise, surprise these so-called ISIS remnants just took over a large part of Syria during the last week!

In 2014 I was serving as an ethnographic advisor for an American woman who was planning to do a film on Yazidi culture. It is not so much that I am an expert on Kurdistan but, having read a fair amount of the ethnographic literature on non-Islamic minorities in the Middle East, I was sufficiently informed to make sure that the film would contain no major factual errors.

I knew whom to contact in case I needed advice which included an American professor of Aramaic, a specialist in Kurdistan (he was born there), by the name of Yona Sabar who lives in Los Angeles and teaches at UCLA.

As I was scheduled to go to Kurdistan with my boss during the summer of 2014 (during the height of the ISIS genocidal attack on the Yazidi) I eventually withdrew from the project. I felt the security situation in Northern Iraq was deteriorating and a no one there could guarantee my safety. And so when the ISIS invasion of the Yazidi soon took place, I was deeply disturbed as the Yazidi impressed me as a people as well as in the

richness and toleration expressed in their culture and religion.

Soon after I interviewed some of the Yazidi I had come to know in the US and Canada and published the first major Canadian op ed in their favor (National Post, March 10, 2015), arguing simply that at least 400 volunteer Yazidi translators had been central to the US victory in Kurdistan against Saddam Hussein and that they should be treated as allies in the fight against ISIS, and not only as unjustly “persecuted peoples.”

Simply put, the US military and its government owed and still owe the Yazidi people something for their sons’ courage and bravery in forwarding American interests in Iraq.

I kept on writing and encouraged other journalists in Canada and the USA, and later Israel to do the same to publicize the Yazidi plight as I was not doing this to get “journalistic scoops.”

With my Canadian Yazidi friend Mirza Ismail, the de facto leader of the Canadian Yazidi community, we formed Project Abraham, a Yazidi and Canadian Jewish activist group that raised funds to help Yazidi emigrate to Canada and that lobbied the Canadian government to sponsor as many as they could to come here as refugees.

Eventually the Government of Canada let in under one thousand Yazidi to Canada (mostly widowed women and children), cynically promising every one of them that their surviving relatives would follow soon after, knowing full well that this would not be the case.

Most of our donors and volunteers (but not all of them) knew very well that if the forces of radical Islam could do what they did to the Yazidi, they would try to do the same to Israel and so, on October 7th, 2023, the ideological partners of ISIS, Hamas, partially succeeded.

Instead of demanding the 20-40,000 dollars per captive that Isis captors of Yazidi have asked for in the past, their ideological brothers in Hamas, Hezbollah and the Iranian government are demanding no less than the neutralization of the IDF. This would create the military conditions for the destruction of the Jewish state. The stakes of Jihad have risen.

There is no doubt that if the Biden administration had successfully pressured and maneuvered the Israelis to capitulate, the Jewish survivors of a final Jihad against them would be treated as the Yazidi have been treated by ISIS, while the leaders of the West and the UN would cry crocodile tears. Israel will not let this happen and so the battle continues. Things should change under President Trump's new administration.

In the course of my activism, when I finally met up with some of the Yazidi whom we had successfully brought to Canada, and they began to feel comfortable with me, knowing that I was Jewish they would often ask me, "The Western world has deserted us and so, why do you and your Canadian Jewish friends still try to help us?"

I would ask them, "Do you know that Jews used to live in your home area?" Many of them would answer yes and then say that their parents or grandparents mentioned that the two communities never fought but traded with one another. I then simplified the issue by saying, "Good neighbors should not forget one another."

By that time, my own' and other writers efforts were slowly creating a bit of a stir among Jewish writers in North America. And soon after Israeli journalists also took up the cause of the Yazidi. Several Yazidi managed to make it to Israel for charitably sponsored medical treatment. They all left as friends of the Jewish state if they were not already that.

But the deeper answer to why there has been a growth in the desire of Jews and especially Israelis to help people like the Yazidi has much to do with an evolving self-awareness of just what Jewish peoplehood means in today's Israel. This is about the growth and development of Israel as a multiethnic (not a "multicultural") democracy. There is a profound difference between the two.

When during the 19th century many Jews in Europe woke up to the fact that despite the enlightenment and the giving of formal legal rights to European citizens "of the Jewish faith," the medieval prejudices of their host societies had not gone away. And so, the Jews of Europe realized during the second half of the 19th century that they were now threatened by both racial nationalism in Western Europe and an intolerant one size fits all internationalist Marxism in Eastern Europe.

Both ideologies wanted the Jews as a people to "disappear." Secular Zionism was the answer to this paradox and despite great tragedy and incredible odds, it gave birth to the State of Israel, a strong ally of the West and of Canada, until Justin Trudeau's recent shameless and total capitulation to the lawfare witch-hunt of the ICC against the democratically elected leaders of Israel today.

The mostly Eastern European born "elites" who now governed independent Israel after 1948 (elite is a funny name for people who were as poor as church mice), had to decide how Western and how "ethnic" Israeli society would become. Israel's first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, argued that Israel was a melting pot but should lean to the West. Israel's second president, Itzhak Ben Tsvi, had a slightly different vision.

He believed that the Jews of the Islamic world and who had flocked to Israel after independence (they were expelled en masse by most Arab countries after 1948) had a richness of

culture which should not be steamrolled by an imitative modernity, preached, and selectively practiced by Ashkenazim (Jews from Eastern Europe) who themselves had not grown up in successful democracies.

And so we turn to the exemplary story of Yona Sabar who was the first recipient of a research scholarship from the institute named after Ben Zvi and whose mandate was the study of the culture of "Oriental Jewry."

Many years ago when I gave myself a crash course on the ethnography of the Jewish people, I came across the writings of Yona Sabar who had published a book on the folklore of the Jews of Kurdistan (northern Iraq and parts of eastern Syria, Turkey, and Iran) where he was born and raised. But Sabar was and is more than that. He was and is a world famous comparative Semiticist and, he had grown up speaking Aramaic, what Christian scholars have called and call the "language of Jesus."

Sabar was born and raised in the village of Zakho on the Habur river near the border of modern Iraq, Syria, and Turkey in Kurdistan. The Jews of Kurdistan were mountain people. They were mostly traders and artisans and often farmers, who provided services to their Kurdish Muslim patrons and to nearby wandering Arab nomadic neighbors.

Although many Kurdish Jewish men could speak Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish and Persian their native language was Aramaic, a tongue that had once been the administrative language of the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Empires and that had flourished in a Christian Iraq until the Arab conquest in the 7th century AD, when Arabic began to overtake it.

Despite their eventual conversion to Islam, the Kurds retained their Indo-European language. Under them the Jews of mountainous northern Iraq became a "protected" minority across a range of changing Kurdish chieftains who at best guaranteed

their safety in exchange for taxes and labor.

Compared to so many other Jews of the Islamic world, the Kurdish Jews were relatively tolerated by their Kurdish tribal Muslim hosts who were usually themselves in revolt against the Ottomans in Istanbul and later, the Arabs from the south, who ruled modern Iraq and whose policies have been and continue to be so destructive such as those of Saddam Hussein.

For example, Kurdish Muslims out of solidarity would eat Matza (the unleavened bread that is eaten by Jews during this holiday to commemorate the Exodus out of Egypt) during Passover and Jews would refrain from smoking cigarettes in front of their Kurdish Muslim neighbors during the Muslim month long fast of Ramadan, when smoking is forbidden during the day.

And so the Kurdish Jews, unlike the wealthy and Anglicized Jews of modern southern Arab Iraq, lived a tribal, semi-literate preindustrial life in the wilds of Kurdistan. Jewish travelers who began to “discover” them during the last few centuries could not decide if they were “primitives” or even better, descendants of the lost ten tribes, who still lived in the territory of their former conquering Assyrians among minorities of Aramaic speaking Christians and Kurdish speaking Muslims and Yazidi. Given recent historical research the latter theory is quite plausible as it is the tradition of the Kurdish Jews themselves.

Yona Sabar was the last Jew in his village to celebrate his Bar Mitzvah in the Kurdish Jewish quarter of the village of Zakho in Kurdistan. By that time, the forces of a “unified” Arab dominated Muslim Iraq had overwhelmed and overcame any surviving regional Kurdish autonomy. The pernicious anti-Semitic anti Zionism of the Arab rulers of modern Iraq was manic, venal, and violent, and so, the Kurdish Jews migrated to Israel en masse in the early 1950s although many had come to Mandated Palestine before WWII.

Many of these highland Kurdish Jews' Muslim neighbors mourned their passing and hoped for their return as they were expelled during a short period of time and airlifted to Israel. When these Kurdish Jews got to the promised land it was still an uphill climb.

When the Kurdish Jews arrived en masse in Israel during the early 1950s three to four years after its creation, the new State of Israel was close to broke. It had to build an army as the Arab States had not stopped working towards its destruction, it had to absorb European survivors of the Holocaust and about a million Jews expelled from the Arab Islamic countries whose nondemocratic leaders had vowed to "exterminate" Israel, including Yona's family.

The Kurdish Jews did not have the sophistication to get good jobs and so many of the men became poorly paid construction workers. The elders disappeared into the background, demoralized, and at best supplied emotional support to their challenged children and grandchildren by keeping the folkloric and culinary traditions of their ancestors alive, and by speaking Aramaic to their children and grandchildren.

Yona Sabar was one of a small group of Kurdish Jews who despite all odds managed to make the democratic institutions of the new Jewish State work in his favor, for Jews wherever they are, honor learning and scholarship. He managed to get good grades and master English and soon found himself at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem as a student of Hebrew and Arabic.

One of his Ashkenazi professors, an international luminary in comparative Semitics, noted that Sabar came from an Aramaic speaking family and suggested that he use his family and neighbors as sources to put together a dictionary of spoken Kurdish Jewish Aramaic and compare it to the trilateral roots of Hebrew in order to track meanings and changes in grammar over time.

Sabar was energized by this task and soon discovered a remarkable informant Mamo Yona, an elder his father's age, a bearded, turbaned immigrant from Jewish Kurdistan with the memory of Homer. This is what anthropologists call a "key informant," and Sabar recorded, transcribed, and analyzed many hours of recitations from this fountain of local knowledge. It also gave him the content for his first academic article published as an undergraduate.

Eventually Sabar heard that the great Jewish Semiticist, Franz Rosenthal, was teaching at Yale and an Israeli friend recommended he write to him. Well a long story later took the young Sabar to Yale where he completed his MA and PhD in the field of comparative Semitics with a focus on the Aramaic of his natal community

Eventually this wunderkind from Aramaic speaking Jewish Kurdistan via Israel, attained a tenure track position at UCLA that led to a career that has not stopped, and which has made Professor Sabar internationally renowned and respected.

Yona Sabar always wanted to return to Zakho, the town of his birth in Iraqi Kurdistan and so when the US liberated Kurdistan and created a no-fly zone over it in the early 1990s, he returned and visited his early haunts. He was well received for at that time the ruling Kurdish clans were pro-Western and pro-Israel.

But then something unusual happened. Yona Sabar's first-born son Ariel had become a successful journalist as a young man, but like so many children of immigrant parents in North America had felt that when growing up as a native-born hip southern Californian, his father was a blast from the past that he preferred to sideline.

In his mind his father had stood for the old world, people who spoke with accents, people who wore the wrong clothes, drove the wrong cars, and had obscure interests. Simply not cool.

But when Ariel's wife gave birth to their own son, he began an oral research project dedicated to telling his father's story, just like his father had once recorded Mamo Yona and his age mates tales from Kurdistan.

In the book [My Father's Paradise-A Son's Search for his Jewish Past in Kurdish Iraq](#) published in 2008 we are treated to a biography of Yona Sabar from his son's perspective. It is a fascinating read and at a certain level a kind of therapy conducted by a mature son, to see his father sympathetically from the perspective of a talented, but fearful Israeli Jewish Kurdish immigrant to the complex world power and society that is modern America.

The book is professionally researched and beautifully written. I read it in a few short days. One thing touched me deeply. When Yona Sabar's mother gave birth to her first daughter as a young teenager in pre-WWII Kurdistan, her milk ran out.

Her family found an Arab woman from a wandering clan of nomads who offered to suckle the girl and then return her to her family a few months later. After these few months, her husband returned to Zakho from a visit to the tribe to tell his wife that their daughter had died. It was and remained a trauma, a hole in her soul.

Yona and his siblings and his children grew up knowing that their first-born sister had died young, but it was Ariel who on a trip to Kurdistan with his father, and then by himself, began to do the research to find out what may have really happened. She had survived.

It turns out that decades later people remembered an Arab nomad woman from the area who had suckled a Jewish girl but did not return her to her family after having lied to Yona's father that the baby had died. Instead, it turns out she may have raised her as her own daughter.

With further investigation Ariel discovered that other Kurdish

Jewish women's children may have suffered a similar fate as in those days with high infant mortality, every surviving boy or girl was a working member of a clan and valued as such.

As it was known that Jews in Iraq historically never had the political power to right injustices against them this kind of double-dealing child trafficking could not be challenged. In Iraq whatever the state was, Ottoman, Kurdish or Arab it was rarely on the side of the Jews and often ranged against them. In some ways this has not changed as rockets from bases in Iraq pound Israel as I write this.

The book ends describing a growing number of well-intentioned and not so well-intentioned Kurdish Muslims who give evidence for the survival and even the continued existence of Yona's absent sister. In some versions she is already dead and, in others still alive somewhere in the region, in Turkey, Syria, or Mosul in northern Iraq. At this point in the book Ariel Sabar's story telling reaches its climax as you hope against hope that this woman has survived. In the end, he and we do not know. It is an unfinished, tantalizing tale.

On October 4, 2024, while I was having coffee at a restaurant in Ein Kerem, Jerusalem during an extended stay in Israel I read the following on the BBC web site:

A Yazidi woman who was kidnapped aged 11 in Iraq by the Islamic State group and subsequently taken to Gaza has been rescued after more than a decade in captivity there, officials from Israel, the US and Iraq said...The Yazidis are a religious minority who mostly live in Iraq and Syria. In 2014 the Islamic State group overran the Yazidi community in Sinjar in northern Iraq, massacring thousands of men, and enslaving girls and women...The Israeli military said the now 21-year-old's captor in Gaza had been killed during the ongoing war between Israel and the Palestinian armed group Hamas, probably as a result of an air strike.

Since then Israel is still being hammered by Iran, Hezbollah, Iranian and Iraqi militias based in Arab southern Iraq.

The gradual acceptance of Kurdish Jews and their culture in the mosaic that now comprises modern multiethnic Israeli identity, is as different from Israeli self-perceptions in the early 1950s as chalk is from cheese. The Jewish historical exploration of its national history in Kurdistan, as well as Jewish and Israel advocacy for the Yazidi, has contributed to a growing national awareness that Jewish history and culture has had a 2,700-year history in Kurdistan, and so, most modern Israelis lean towards the vision of President Ben Zvi when it comes to national awareness.

Scholars like Sabar have assisted this process by making the folklore, history and stories of the Jews of Kurdistan part of the national narrative. The growing awareness that the Yazidi were a peace-loving neighbor of the Jews of Kurdistan is a recent and welcome part of this trend.

And so, we should not be surprised that while fighting a new war of national survival, the Israeli Defense Forces and their allies have risked the lives of its young soldiers to save one Yazidi slave from her tormentors in Hamas controlled Gaza. Why ?

In this case it is partly the result of the efforts of a tireless Montreal Jewish advocate for the Yazidi, Steve Maman whom I have had the pleasure of meeting and working with over the years. It is also because modern Jews and Israelis have learnt that that "Good neighbors should not forget one another."

Today, Canada is home to thousands of recently arrived Yazidi refugees. I have met many and talked with many of them. They had great hopes for a new life in Canada, but they cannot understand why the Canadian government has not reunited them with their families as was promised before they came here as

refugees and immigrants. Canada is a big country and could absorb thousands of Yazidi refugees. They are non-violent, family oriented and hard working.

Canadian Yazidis also ask me, "Why have not the Canadian Armed Forces in Iraq done anything to help those surviving Yazidi who are still mistreated by their Kurdish and Arab neighbours and, by the Iraqi government who do nothing to help them?" It is a profound question.

Today, Yazidism may be the "oldest new religious community in Canada" and Canada has a major and active military presence in Iraq in the fight against ISIS (Operation Impact) and its ever changing affiliates. Surely Canada can use that presence to help the Yazidi who are persecuted by both the remnants of ISIS, their Kurdish and Arab neighbours and the Iraqi government with whom Canada has diplomatic relations. It would be wise if our forces there were directed to help the Yazidi on the ground. That would be the "old fashioned" Canadian thing to do. We did during WWII and we did it with the boat people of Viet Nam, so why not with the Yazidi, as Canada is officially at war in their ancient homeland in the mountains of northern Iraq.

As fellow citizens and good neighbours they deserve our help.

Thanks for reading.

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