

Let My People Go: Passover and Slavery in Iraq

by Geoffrey Clarfield



On March 28, Jews around the world will sit down and feast, some outside in balmy weather in Israel, California, and in the hotels of the Gulf Arab states that are now at peace with the Jewish State. The rest of us in the temperate world will celebrate on Zoom. The story that is told at Passover is as old as the Bible. It's about [freedom](#).

The Passover meal and story are based on the Exodus, when the enslaved children of Israel left bondage in Egypt. Through the Christian Bible it has become the story of liberation from oppression in many places, most notably in the southern United States before, during, and after the Civil War. This Passover, I will be reminding my friends and family that there are still slaves in the world and it's our job to fight for their liberation.

Let me tell you about two young women who, at this moment, are

living in slavery in Iraq.

In 2013 (one year before the invasion of northern Iraq by ISIS), a Yezidi man and his immediate family (four sons and two daughters) moved to the territory of the Kurdish regional government in the mountainous north of the recently newly created Republic of Iraq. His daughters are Sonia and Nahida, respectively 13 and 14 at the time. Today, they are 21 and 22 and still alive. In 2013, their father got a job in a village as caretaker of a chicken farm.

In October 2014, just about two months after the Yezidi genocide began, a nephew of the owner of the farm and one of his friends with two other men, accompanied by more than 10 armed Kurdish militiamen, at 10 p.m. seized the two Yezidi teenage girls (Sonia and Nahida) at gunpoint and warned their Yezidi father that if he tells anyone, he and his sons would be killed, wherever they may be.

Let it be clear that these two men seized these women as their sex slaves, and what these local men did to these girls was no different from what ISIS did to Yezidi women on a massive scale.

The father then summoned an older son who was working in Sulaymaniyah at the time. This son, along with his sympathetic boss, a Kurdish Muslim (and who both now live in Germany), came to the village the next day. They went to the owner of the chicken farm and reminded him, saying, "You promised me that you would protect my family and no one should harm them, so I want my sisters back now!" The owner coldly told him that if he pursued the issue he, as well as his family, would be killed.

The two girls, Sonia and Nahida, are still in captivity, because they are Yezidi. I have withheld the names of their captors for legal reasons and to protect the women. They are being held as "slaves," sex slaves actually, and I am asking

on their behalf for the U.S. or Canadian Embassy in Iraq to appeal to the Kurdish regional government and the government of Iraq to let them join their brother in Europe; as we say in the spirit of Passover repeating what Moses once said to Pharaoh, "Let my people go."

For those who are unfamiliar with the social landscape of Iraq and its northern mountainous region, let me point out that this part of Iraq is home to a nation of indigenous monotheists, the Kurdish- and Arabic-speaking Yezidi, a group of non Muslims, and their neighbors, a now dwindling number of Aramaic-speaking Assyrian Christians who claim descent from the Assyrians of the Bible.

It's an unfortunate fact that the Western press and diplomatic corps has not yet recognized the special human rights needs of the multi-ethnic groups who live in northern Iraq and which is often called Kurdistan because of the majority Kurdish-speaking people who live there.

In 2014, ISIS conquered northern Iraq (Kurdistan). They massacred thousands of Yezidi men, raped and enslaved up to 7,000 Yezidi women, and took thousands of underage boys, forcibly converting them to Islam and training them as terrorists and suicide bombers. They drove out more than 300,000 Yezidi who now languish in internally displaced person (IDP) camps in Iraq.

Sadly, at that time the Kurdish militia (the Peshmerga) of the regional government of Kurdistan pulled out of the Sinjar mountains, the homeland of the Yezidi people, often hours before ISIS terrorists arrived in 2014. There are scores of firsthand witnesses of this dereliction of duty.

Nevertheless, Canada and other Coalition partners continue to honor the local government and its militias as the "good guys," for they fought with them during the Gulf Wars against Saddam Hussein. Yet there are and continue to be many human

rights violations carried out by people connected to the regional government that go unreported and ignored by the Coalition that still has soldiers in Iraq.

The eldest brother of Sonia and Nahida is now in Germany and desperately wants his sisters to come to freedom in the West. Canada and the United States have troops on the ground in Iraq. The Americans have spent billions in Iraq and the Canadians have spent \$400 million a year of taxes on an effort to fight ISIS and "extremism" there, yet the U.S. and Canadian embassies and representatives in Iraq seem unable or unwilling to help in these kinds of situations.

Governments like that of the United States and Canada that declare themselves to be supporters of human rights and women's rights cannot allow these kinds of abominations to go unchallenged. They need to act now. I can provide them with the names and details of these perpetrators if they want to investigate further. Something must be done.

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