

**The Holy City**  
*Willie Powers '20*

Gene received a phone call just as we were about to fall asleep. He picked it up, spoke, hung up. He turned to me. “Haval says that we need to bring two pairs of socks tomorrow. Otherwise we’ll burn our feet.”

Gene and I were classmates at the American University of Beirut. We’d decided to fly to Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, for a long weekend. We hired a tour guide, Haval, to take us to the village of Lalish, about two hours north of Erbil. I was filled with excitement the morning of the tour, as Lalish is the holiest site for the Yazidis, a secretive religious community. But I didn’t want to burn my feet.

What I knew about the Yazidis, I had gathered from CNN broadcasts and news articles. They reside in the isolated villages of northern Iraq and Syria, practicing a unique fusion of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, ancient Zoroastrianism, and pagan beliefs. The Yazidi faith centers around *Melek Taus*, an angel that takes the form of a Peacock. Their veneration of *Melek Taus* is considered devil worship to many Muslims, which has caused multiple massacres of Yazidis in recent years. Isolation has protected the Yazidi faith, but it has also left many people, including me, curious.

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Haval drove fast along the asphalt roads, nearing 80 miles per hour as we exited Erbil. He only slowed when the road cut through a village.

“Are you sure we have to go this fast?” Gene asked.

“I have two small children at home,” Haval replied. “I would never do something dangerous. I want to see them tonight.” Haval’s voice was soft, but he spoke with a sense of authority, to the point that I found it hard to dispute anything that he said. Haval had a round face, his eyes always covered by a pair of large sunglasses. Although he gave tours to visitors from across the world, he had never left Iraq. He asked about our personal lives, comparing them to his relatively conservative upbringing in a Muslim Kurdish family. Gene discussed the American invasion of Iraq with Haval while I looked out of the window, my mind wandering.

The countryside outside of Erbil was barren. Black-haired goats and grey sheep ate the green scrub and dead grass that covered the hills. The hills, so numerous and small that they resembled waves in a sea, were flecked with yellow boulders.

As we neared Lalish, we passed an oil well with metal tubes reaching out of the earth and a brilliant orange stream of fire pouring out of a flare stack. “When we get to Lalish, you cannot step on the earth with your shoes. It is against Yazidi custom. You must put on your other pair of socks so that your feet do not burn on the hot concrete.” Haval reminded us before pointing his thumb towards the back of the car. “I brought two extra pairs just in case.”

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The village of Lalish was wedged between two large hills, their slopes dotted with off-white rocks and olive trees. Several honey-colored stone buildings formed the core of the village, packed close to one another as they climbed the two hills. It was ten in the morning and 112 degrees outside, but the large green trees that shaded the village protected us from the sun. Our feet, wrapped in three pairs of socks, did not burn.

Under a shady tree, water from a small fountain trickled behind a metal cage, painted white. “That is the first well on earth,” Haval said. Barefoot children were sticking their arms through the cage, cupping their hands and drinking the water. I glanced their way, smiling, but

they didn't look up. Haval pointed to a worn stone next to the children. "That is the stone Adam was cut from." Besides the children, the street was empty.

We walked to a pavilion, under which was a mural of Noah's Ark. Noah stood at the helm of his ship, surrounded by crashing waves. "This is where Noah's ship landed," said Haval, pointing to the concrete floor. Gene lifted his camera and took a photo as Haval moved forward, motioning for us to follow.

We entered a courtyard facing a large stone temple crowned by two conical domes, each with a golden orb at its top. An old man kneeled in the entryway to the holy site, kissing the stone floor. We followed Haval to the entrance, where he abruptly came to a stop. He spoke quietly, not wishing to disturb the man. "Angels sleep under the doorways, so we cannot step on the threshold." We stepped carefully over the stone threshold, engraved with depictions of flowers and snakes.

The room we entered was dark and cool. As our eyes adjusted to the darkness, we saw pillars wrapped in silk fabric of all colors. Pieces of fabric were knotted in chains that fell down to the floor. The room was illuminated by olive oil lamps lining the walls, the smell of which filled the air. A man wearing a grey polo shirt and sunglasses was tying a piece of silk to the end of a long chain.

Haval turned to us, smiling. "That man is doing things wrong." We looked back at the man as Haval continued. "He is supposed to untie another piece of fabric before tying his own." As we walked further into the room, Haval explained to us how the Yazidis maintain a caste system. He had met a member of the *pir* caste, a spiritually enlightened man, who had shared his knowledge of the Yazidi rituals. Only a small number of Yazidis, the *sheiks* and *pirs*, learn about the practices of their religion, which are passed on orally. Yet Yazidis of all castes must make a pilgrimage to Lalish and participate in its rituals.

We entered a new room covered in grey marble from floor to ceiling, its air even cooler and the walls damp. A large box covered in black silk sat at the center of the room. "Look down there," Haval whispered, pointing to a steep set of stairs carved into the stone. They curved further into the earth, from which a golden light emanated. "That is the tomb of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir. The Yazidis believe he is the reincarnation of *Melek Taus*, the peacock angel." I peered downward, viewing golden silk tapestries illuminated by oil lamps. Haval continued, "The Yazidis believe that *Melek Taus* rules over earth and all humans."

Gene crouched down, trying to get a better view down the stairway, and asked, "Can we go down there?"

"No," Haval replied. "Only Yazidis are allowed to enter."

We continued through a passageway, ducking under a short doorway. We entered a room carved from stone and covered in black soot. The walls were lined with ceramic vases encased in layers of a wet, black substance that gleamed in the dim light. Haval and Gene walked ahead while I remained in the room, shining my flashlight into the vases. I looked carefully at the vases for around ten minutes, thinking that if I could see what was inside, I might understand this strange place better. Inside the vases there was only more soot.

"The temple used to be a pilgrimage site for the ancient Assyrians," Haval said to Gene, his voice echoing through the rooms. I turned to follow them, forced to crawl through the next doorway which was roughly three feet high, much shorter than all of the others. I looked up, seeing Gene and Haval pointing at a wall. "Would you like to try a Yazidi ritual?" Haval asked me.

He handed me three stones, asking me to close my eyes and face the far wall of the chamber, where there were two holes in the wall. “Throw the stones one by one,” he said, his hand on my shoulder. “If the stone goes in the larger hole, you will go to heaven. If it goes into the other one, you will go to hell.”

“Do you believe it is true?” I asked Haval, hesitant to toss the first stone. I wanted to understand the full gravity of the ritual.

“It is a Yazidi belief,” Haval replied. “I do not believe in it.”

I closed my eyes and threw the first stone. “You are still on earth,” Haval said. “Try again.” I missed on the second and third tries. My question unanswered, we turned to leave.

The three of us emerged from the dark chambers into the noon sun. Haval led us up a steep set of stairs that wound their way above the village. When the stairs ended, we found ourselves on a plateau halfway up the hillside. A wooden cross planted in the ground was wrapped in thousands of strips of fabric, bleached by the sun. Haval had no explanation for this Yazidi practice. Purple wildflowers grew from the gravel at our feet. Behind us was a small house, and below us was the temple. In the distance we could see the flames from the oil well.

“Would you like to meet the soldiers who defend this town?” Haval asked us.

We had not yet interacted with a single Yazidi, so Gene and I were thrilled at the chance to meet the soldiers. He led us to the small house, knocking on the wooden door. A young man, about my age, poked his head out, exchanged some words with Haval, and let us in.

Eight men in their late teens and early 20s sat on metal beds topped with thin mattresses. The men were skinny, dressed in ill-fitting camouflage uniforms. They sat, their guns propped against the beds, drinking tea and smoking cigarettes. As the men only spoke Kurdish, Haval translated. Gene asked Haval, “Could you ask them who they are defending Lalish from?”

One of the men, with dark black hair and a mustache, responded. Haval said, “They are defending the holy city from jihadists...and he wants to know if you would like tea.”

I nodded my head along with Gene, and another one of the men got up from his bed to pour tea into a small paper cup. One soldier with long sideburns and pimples covering his face took out a pack of cigarettes and held them out towards us. There was no need for Haval to translate. Gene shook his head and asked Haval to tell the soldiers that he did not like cigarettes. I nodded my head, and I was handed a skinny cigarette. It was an Iraqi brand and contained about as much paper as tobacco. I was not a smoker, and I smiled at the soldiers through coughs. Haval gave me a disapproving look, later scolding me for partaking in such an unhealthy activity.

The man who handed me the cigarettes pulled his phone from his pocket, opened the Facebook app, and handed it to me. This, too, did not require translation. I entered my name and sent myself a friend request. The other men followed suit, friending Gene and me. After thirty more minutes together, Gene, Haval and I shook hands with the soldiers and walked down the steps to our car. On the ride out of the holy city, we took off our extra pairs of socks, now covered in the dirt and soot of Lalish.