

The Days of Passover with the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim

By Shomron

Prior to the evening of April 17th, 2000, a Monday, all the community of the 324 Samaritans of Neve Marqeh, Holon, Israel, traveled to Kiryat Luza where the 301 residents remain year round. The small community of 301 residents that resides year round sits on the summit of Mount Gerizim. The short main street through the small community has no name. There are but few side streets. The village has a new Samaritan museum, a small grocery store, new tourist store and restaurant. Each is worth the visit. The kids play on the street like any small town in the world. Most Samaritans speak at least 3 languages, Arabic, Hebrew and their own Biblical Hebrew. English is still new to the community and understood by few. But even French is instructed in the schools.

On this night, at sunset begins, the 13th day on the Samaritan Biblical year. This is the night in which matzos (unleavened bread) is baked. The day prior all leaven was cleaned from the houses. In the evening before sunset, the men dressed in their tradition garments pray at the synagogue while the ladies prepare the unleavened dough at home. The men return home after sunset and begin the ancient memorial. The dough is rolled into fist-sized balls. The oven is a 28-inch steel shaped bowl rests upside down over a flame of wood or propane. The men pound the dough flat and then flip it from arm to arm like pizza dough. When the dough is thin and about 18-22-inches in diameter it is placed on the steel pan to bake. After about 20 seconds, the bread is flipped for another 20 or so seconds more. The unleavened bread of wheat and water does not take long to bake. It is placed then on a stack for the weeks use. It is acceptable to sample the unleavened bread but only until midnight. From midnight on till the seasonal festival is over, no prepared food is permitted. Only what is made from natural products are permitted excluding anything leaven, of course. With all the matzos made, it is time to visit the family, neighbors and friends. Hot tea with sugar or fresh juice is the general welcome. Some men share water pipes called an agila.

Early the next morning comes the sound of the men praying from the synagogue. This evening is the Passover Sacrifice. This is a very special day to the Samaritans. At the center of town rests the prepared area for this special celebration. This fenced area rests between the new Samaritan museum and the grocery store. The gate off the main street leads down to the ceremonial area. On both sides of the walkway there are a total of 5 stone mortared ovens. Each is about 5 feet in diameter and around 6 feet deep. Over each has a ten foot square steel grate. A temporary guardrail surrounds each oven. Dried wood and brush are on hand for the fire. Plastic bags of dirt sit next to each hole to be used to over the ovens.

A couple of Levites oversee the preparations and ceremony till its completion. A couple of Arab men set up white plastic chairs for the tourists on the raised areas outside the fence. Many local dignitaries were invited, as always usually have the best seats. The

remainder chairs are for the tourists that come by commercial tourist buses. Some Tourists prefer to stand against the fence for a better look. There are many camera crews, even from the BBC to document the ceremony. The Israeli Army was also stationed in case of trouble.

It was a beautiful day, warm, with not a cloud in the sky. At four o'clock, a few of the younger Levites kindle the fires in the ovens with the prepared brush and wood. A fire truck from the town of Nablus was on hand in case of an emergency. Tourists begin arriving. The museum was full of interested people. All were asking questions. Most of them appeared to be Jewish. I guess they were interested in their roots as some told me.

I was told to watch for the clouds. A thick dark cloud appeared moving in from the southwest moved towards our direction. It was the only cloud in the blue clear sky. It came towards the mount like the shape of a flock of geese. When the clouds reached the mount it stopped and spread fast covering the whole sky. There was only one spot that the cloud did not cover. A hole of blue sky was directly over us. I was told as I looked around by a couple of Samaritans that this happens every year. They also told me that during the Passover sacrifice the opening would enlarge which it did. During the ceremony I looked up and seen that the clouds around the blue opening were slowly turning in a circular motion. It was totally amazing!

The Samaritans all dressed in white clothes gathered together in song. The white clothes worn were as I was told, "so that no one stood out over the next person". Only the High Priests and Elders wore different color garments, traditional of course. Their families helped the older Elders to their chairs. The men each had a cane or a type of staff along with their sandals.

The remaining Elders went to the High Priests house. The oldest man in the community invites him to the Passover Sacrifice, which is their custom. Accepting his offer they all moved with a large following to the Passover center. With everyone present chanting songs of the Passover began. Prayers were also chanted.

As the time grew closer to dusk, the men placed the gentle lambs between their legs. The guarded lambs were inspected by the Levites and had been watched over for a total of 14 days before this day. There were a total of 37-40 lambs for all the families of the Samaritans.

All was quiet as the High Priest spoke in Hebrew at the beginning of the setting of the sun. Then finally there was a loud repetition to the Priest last words. It was the words to make the sacrifice and all the Samaritans repeated them. At this moment is when the opening in the clouds enlarged so I was told but I was too busy to see this phenomena. With all the family members gathered around their lambs I could only see their movements. The trained men one per lamb made only one quick movement. The lambs were skinned and cleaned then inspected once more. Each was placed on a skew. The wooden skewers were about 10 feet long 3" at one end and narrowing. At about 30" inches up from the base are four 12" wooden pegs, two in each direction. The lambs were guided on headfirst. When the meat touched the wooden pegs the skew is lifted vertically. The body is tied tightly to the skew. The koshering salt is poured over each lamb.

The sun now set, lights give them vision as the meat is placed into the hot ovens. At least 7 skewers per oven are carefully held while the steel grates are lifted and the skewers are positioned in-between the webbing of the grate. When all is satisfied the grates are covered with wet burlap bags. The heat coming from the opening in the ground, the oven is scene at this point. There are red-hot ashes in the bottom from all the burnt wood. In a mud pan dirt is mixed with water and bucketed to the burlap. Young men pack the mud creating a crust over the oven. A weak point from the heat pops oven and is quickly repaired. The heat remains inside and because air cannot enter the oven the skewers are not burnt. The exposed skewers are shortened with a saw.

The guardrails are placed around the ovens. The Levites inspect that all the remains are burnt. The area is cleaned with water washed into the ground. Singing still is heard. At this point the gates are opened. Some of the tourists enter asking questions. Most of the older Samaritans decide to reside at home at this time. Slowly the tourist buses depart. At 9:30 pm the only remains one camera crew and a few tourists looking for a ride home. There are only about one third of the Samaritans present, mostly the younger generation.

At 11:15, ladies with pans and bowls begin to appear. Within minutes the area is full again and they uncover the hot ovens. Hoes are used to pull off the crusted hard dirt. The steam is very hot and all move cautiously fast. The aroma of the meat smelled deliciously wonderful. Carefully the grate is lifted over the cut skewers. The skewers are pulled out so that they do not touch the sides of the oven. Some of the tender meat falls into the oven. Families gather collecting their portion. The right thighs are collect for the Priests. The ladies quickly head for home with their full trays.

Some families decide to stay to eat because of the open ovens in the center. Osher Sassony's family was one of them. His sweet mother and sisters carried down the rest of the supper to the center. Osher's father Shoham and his brother ----- sit eating with their staffs in the hands. Once all have eaten the extra meat is thrown in to the open fire were the remains and skins were burnt. Trays appear and their remains are also burnt. All is burnt; nothing is left of the meat. The fire soars from the meat! Levites inspect the grounds that no meat goes unburnt. Some meat that had fallen on the ground from the skewer is burnt also.

The last camera crew had left during the meal. The last of the tourists were a guy and a girl that became friends during this feast, they finally leave. I at 12:30 AM decide it is time for bed. Some of the Samaritans stayed there all night. I was too tired from the long day.

As I slept I was awoken at 3:30 AM by a loud noise. It was the wind. It was blowing very hard thru the buildings that it woke me. I lay there with only one thought on my mind. I wondered if I would be alive in the mourning. I am the first-born son of my mother. Silly, I know but that is what I felt at the time. I also felt that I was missing something that may have also been going on outside but I did not go to investigate. I asked Osher about the wind and he told me that it was strange. I just smiled.

What an incredible experience it was to see the Passover, Samaritan style. No, I think I should say Hebrew Style!