

Mount Gerizim Bet El and Jerusalem

Israel Sedaka - Holon - Israel

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When I'm standing here before you, in this international scientific forum, I regard myself as representing the Kingdom of Israel up to the Eighth century BCE, the "remnant of Israel that are escaped out of the hand of the kings of Assyria" (II Chronicles 30:6), and modern day Israelites, better known to the world as Samaritans.

According to II Kings read the destruction of Samaria when the people of the kingdom of Israel were sent into exile and replaced by foreigners, the author of II Chronicles chapter 30 tells us about envoys sent by king Hezekiah, who had witnessed the destruction of Samaria and consequent exile. These envoys go from city to city in the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, in an attempt to convince the Israelites to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The phrase "from city to city" tells us that the majority of the people had remained in Samaria. Furthermore, despite their difficult political position, lacking a king, they rejected Hezekiah's appeal, when he tells them "Now be not stiff-necked as your fathers were". "They laughed them to scorn and mocked them". Here one should note how Rabbi Levi son of Gershon (Ralbag) interprets the reference to the Exile in II Kings 17:34. He writes: "The remaining are Israel, since not all were exiled, as is seen in the story of Hezekiah's envoys sent to the remnant of Israel."

An additional, principal point in II Chronicles 30 is the humbling of Israelites dwelling in the northern part of the country, and their arrival in Jerusalem. Here we see that those Israelites who humbled themselves and come to Jerusalem are considered proper Jews, whereas those Israelites who rejected king Hezekiah's appeal and remained loyal to the earlier religious center of Israel are called foreigners, Cuthites, natives etc. And indeed, the Cuthite tractate ends with decision, "When can one recognize Samaritans as Jews? Once they've rejected Mount Gerizim".

Mount Gerizim is the column of fire, illuminating and reminding all that it is the religious and spiritual center of Israel. King David abandoned Mount Gerizim merely for political reasons, and never had the authority to establish such an important new rule after the times of Moses. Subsequently, Biblical authors as well as Talmudic scholars had mostly concluded that whoever does not believe in Jerusalem is not to be considered a member of Israelite people.

One of the main themes in Deuteronomy is the centralization of worship in a single place, used by the entire land and Israelite tribes. The idea of centralized worship is mentioned 24 times in Deuteronomy, while the site itself is chosen by the Lord, rather than the people, its priests or even the leaders. And this, regardless of the different phrases - whether "the place that he chose" or "the place he shall chose" in both references it is God who will do the choosing. The authority to select the three cities of refuge in Canaan, on the other hand, is given to the people and their leaders - Deuteronomy 19:7 - "Thou shall separate three cities for thee" Not so where the choice concerns the spiritual center. Moses is the means used to transmit the commandment regarding the site where the spiritual center for the people will be, as he had given the people all the commandments and laws.

The significance of the difference between the Jewish version, reading "the place that He shall choose" and the Samaritan version, reading "the place He chose" is not limited to biblical interpretation. Today, from perspective of some three and a half millennia since the settlement of the Israelite tribes in Canaan, it reflects faithfully the history of the Israelite people from the days of Joshua, through the Judges period, the first and second temple and up to modern times. The stormy events in the history of the people of Israel were centered around and affected by this controversy between Israel and Judaea, or Samaritans and Jews. Christianity was also influenced by it, an influence which, as we will show later, is strongly attested to in Christ's meeting with the Samaritan woman at the foot of Mount Gerizim.

Biblical studies manifest the opinions of biblical scholars regarding the multiplicity of places of worship in Israel, in the days of Joshua and up to the reign of king David. In the Jewish version of the Pentateuch these places are referred - "The place which the Lord shall chose "(Deuteronomy 12:14), "To cause his name to dwell there" (Deuteronomy 12:11) "To put his name there" (Deut.12:5). "In all places where I record my name" (Exodus 20:21). Based on these verses, the scholars conclude several places of worship to have existed in Israel prior to the establishment of Jerusalem by king David. This gives rise to several questions: Who appointed king David to establish a new center for the people of Israel? Why did he chose Jerusalem, which for 400 years since Joshua had been a Jebusite city? Was the choice not political? Why did king David avoid building the temple himself - was it because the people objected to his city of choice, Jerusalem? Their cry was "We have no part in David neither have we inheritance in the son of Yishay, every man to his tents O Israel". Why did the temple built by king Solomon, aimed to unit all tribes of Israel, bring about the division of Israel and Judea, a division caused by Jerusalem and lasting to this very day? How does this interpretation conform with the text 4 in Joshua 22:16 - where it is told that the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh merely build an altar on the river Jordan, without even sacrificing on it, and as a result the entire nation of Israel is outraged - "What trespass is this that you have committed against the God of Israel...by building for yourselves an alter that you might rebel this day against the Lord". Here we see the idea of centralized worship "In the place He chose" realized in all its glory, in the days of Joshua son of Nun. It is the idea of belief in a single place, recognized by all the people of Israel. It is rooted so deeply, that even those erecting an altar without ever sacrificing on it are considered rebels. These verses in the book of Joshua refute the interpretation of those claiming religious worship to have been diffused all over Israel up to the days of king David.

Unlike the common reference, in Jewish version of the Pentateuch, denoting the chosen place in future tense, in one instance this version refers to the chosen place in past tense - "Behold, I send an angel before thee, to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee to the place which I have prepared" (Exodus 23:20). Here, the text does not refer to "the place I shall prepare" but rather is identical to the Samaritan version of the Pentateuch.

Let us return to the cities of refuge - Joshua immediately fulfills the divine decree and sets the three cities of refuge in the Trans-Jordan. This immediate decision proves the need those cities, since the entire land has no centers of worship and altars, where the slayer may find refuge. The one existing center may be far, and thus the cities of refuge are chosen and established immediately.

In Moses's Torah, where all the laws and commandments are given to the people of Israel, the sanctity of Jerusalem is never referred to. The Israelites, however, are commanded to bless Mount Gerizim and build an altar (which, in the Jewish version, is built on nearby Mount Ebal). And indeed, once the Israelite are settled in the land of Canaan, Joshua summons the people to Shechem, with the Ark of Covenant, to the gathering at Mount Gerizim. He does not go to Shiloh or Jerusalem. Thus one should ask, where is the place which, in the Jewish version, is "the place He shall choose"? Rashi, first and foremost among the Bible exegetes, interprets thus as Shiloh. Shiloh, like Jerusalem is not mentioned in the book of Joshua, in the list of places given to the Levites as their inheritance. Whereas when the inheritance of the tribe of Ephraim, is described, the Bible explicitly says that the Levites were given the city of Shechem and its suburbs in mount Ephraim (Joshua 21:21). The leaders of the people and its priests throughout the settlement period and up Elie's times -Joshua son of Nun, Caleb, the seventy Elders, the high priests Elazar, Itamar, Pinhas and others - are all buried in the vicinity of the city of Shechem and mount Gerizim, not near Shiloh. According to Jewish tradition, the first to have buried in Shiloh was Eli.

This is what Professor Bebjamin Mazar had to say, in a 1972 conference held in Samaria. "Shechem has always held in place of importance in Israeli consciousness, as an early center of the national in its country, and as the focal point of all national and religious hopes for the unification and unity of the nation. The "Place of Shechem"(Genesis 12:6) in the city had contained a temple of the Lord, with a sacred tree - "the Terebinth of Morea" and an altar called El-elohé-Yisra'el (Genesis 33:20) - a placed of ancient sanctity, that saturate the traditional of nation's fathers 6 Abraham and Ya'aqov, and where Joshua had made the covenant to the people of Israel, and where Jeroboam son of Nebat ruled the tribes of the central and northern parts of the land, once the united kingdom of the house of David had divided".

A brief review of the history of the Israelite tribes from the days of Joshua son of nun onwards, as told in the Samaritan chronicles, and a comparison to the Jewish sources, will reveal that all points of controversy refer to Mount Gerizim. Joshua crosses the river Jordan and goes on to conquer the rest of Canaan. Well before he has completed the conquest, he convenes the nation in Shechem, in the valley separating Mount Gerizim and Ebal, to give the "blessings and cursings according to all that is written in the book of the law. On this historic, dignified occasion, the ark of the covenant was placed at the top of Mount Gerizim. It was here that the high priests of the house of Pinhas, to whom the high priesthood was given, officiated for 260 years. The priesthood list corresponds,

for the most part, to the biblical list of high priests of the house of Pinhas, quoted in Chronicles. According to the Samaritan chronicles, these were the days of grace, of the Shekhina. When Uzi son of Buki, one of the sons of Pinhas, is appointed high priest in Mount Gerizim, it is actually Eli the priest, a dominant, older man, who officiates as high priest. Eli, who refused to accept the authority of the younger Uzi, withdrew from Mount Gerizim to Shiloh and founded there a new religious center, where a part of the people began to worship. This severe division in the nation was used to good advantage by the Philistines, who destroyed the Shiloh temple, forty years after its foundation. The Bible glosses over the priesthood of the sons of Itamar and the causes that had led to their appointment. Jewish traditions associate the removal of 7 the priest of the house of Pinhas with the incident of the daughter of Jephthah, or the incident of the concubine in Gibeah, and its hard bloody aftermath. Historian Josephus Flavius, however, in his book, "The Antiquities of the Jews", book V:318 writes Joseph son of Matityahu "Following Samson's death, the Israelites were led by high priest Eli". Ibid 361 - "Eli was the first ruler of the house of Itamar, the second house of the sons of Aharon, as first the priesthood was given to the house of Elazar...the latter handed it down to his Pinhas, who handed it down to his son Abiezer (Abisha), who gave it to his son Buki, whose son Uzi received it from him, and afterwards the priesthood was given to Eli". Josephus Flavius makes no attempt to explain the reasons for the removal of Pinhas's family, the significance and centrality of the removal and its consequences.

Samaritan history denotes that the period of grace and shekhina, (in Aramaic 'Rehuta') lasted 260 years, from the day the ark of the covenant was placed on mount Gerizim, to the foundation of the new Mishkan in Shiloh, by Eli, when, in the words of the Bible, (deuteronomy 25:17): "and I will hide my face from them".

This act of Eli's led to the foundation of numerous religious centers throughout the nation, and in the words of the book of Judges: "Every man did that which was right in his own eyes", (Judges 21:25). It is in this political and religious void that king David establishes Jerusalem as center. At the death of king Solomon, the united kingdom is divided into Israel and Judaea. All attempts by Davidic kings to reinstate a united kingdom failed over the issue of Jerusalem, as we have seen in king Hezekiah's attempts to convince the remaining Israelites in Samaria. Furthermore, in all the prophecies of the prophets in Judaea or Samaria, who had preached to the people and admonished them for their wrong-doing, we don't find any admonition or any chastisement to the people of Israel, for they are not believing in Jerusalem. Prophet Elijah, when fleeing from Ahab king of Israel, flees to mount Sinai rather than Jerusalem.

The Jewish scholar Shadal - Rabbi Shemuel Luzzato writes, in his exegesis to Genesis 12:10, "The city of Shechem is in the center of Israel. Had David not chosen Jerusalem... Shechem or Shiloh would have been the royal cities. Therefore, when Abraham came there (to Shechem), he was told " I shall give this Land to your seed". And mayhap, if the kingly throne and the temple had indeed been in Shechem or in Shiloh, perhaps the ten tribes would not have rebelled against the house of David".

According to Samaritan chronicles, in the first period of the second temple, the governor of Judeah Zerubbabel appealed the Samaritan's leaders, to build together the temple in Jerusalem. The Samaritan's leaders - the high priest 'Abedel son of 'Azarya' and the president of Jossef tribe 'Azzi son of Shim'on, And Sanbalat the president of Levi tribe, rejected Zerubbabel's appeal.

Zerubbabel the son's son of king Hezekiah, his dream, the dream of the house of king David, to recover an authority on every Israel, and this was the wonderful opportunity. According to book of Ezra, the foreigners, Cuthites etc. appealed to Zerubbabel to participate by construction of the temple in Jerusalem, but they were postponed on. These were not the Samaritans - the sons of the remnant of the Israelites.

In the Second Temple period, Jews and Samaritan argued, before king Ptolemy Phylomater, which is the chosen place mount Gerizim or Jerusalem. Josephus mentions this argument very briefly, in Antiquities 13:9. Samaritan chronicles give a more detailed account of the argument, whose main point were: "Our lord Moses, giver of the Torah, could not have not known which is the chosen place. This place was indeed known to Moses, who quotes it in the tenth commandment, whereas according to the Jewish version, our lord Moses did not know which was the chosen place. However, both our version and theirs, contains the command to sacrifice, as it is written "Year by year in the place" (Deuteronomy 15:20). And if the place had not yet been chosen, where they have sacrificed?... And Abraham the patriarch, on the day he was tested by the Lord, said "upon one of the mountains" in the land of Moriah, and in the song of the crossing of the Red Sea Moses said "In the mountain of thine inheritance, in the place, O Lord, which thou has made for thee to dwell in". and calls its name "ancient mountain" as it is called in the blessing of Moses to the tribe of Joseph, "For the chief things of the ancient mountains, and for the precious things of the lasting hill (not hills), and was therefore given by Jacob as an inheritance to his son Joseph.

The sons of Ephraim and Manasseh argue in favor of the phrasing "The place that he chose", saying that this place was chosen in antiquity to be the chosen place, selected of all the tribes of Israel. The Pentateuch is full of stories describing the prevailing atmosphere in the northern kingdom, in particular the land of Ephraim. The first place Abraham comes to upon arrival in the land of Canaan is Shechem - "And Abram passed through the land to the place of Shechem unto the terebinth of More", (Genesis 12:6). It is here, "in the place" that he builds a first altar to Yahweh. And upon returning from Egypt, where he had gone during the famine, he goes "unto the place of the altar, which he had made there at the first, and there Abram called on the name of the Lord" (Genesis 13:4). When Abraham is told to sacrifice Isaac, he is called to go to the land of Moriyya, not to the mount of Moriyya that first time remembered in the book of Kings: "And they came to the place which God had told him of, and Abraham built an altar there" (Genesis 22:9) - and here again we read "the place" And much like he did upon his return from Egypt, Abraham goes to the place he knows from old and builds "the altar", that is, restores the altar he had erected and known previously.

In the Pentateuch, in the Samaritan version of the Ten Commandments the tenth commandment recognizes the sanctity of mount Gerizim and decrees that altar be built there. This tenth commandment is missing in the Jewish version, and naturally in all the translations based on the Jewish, rather than the Samaritan version. The main argument is that the Jews believe in nine rather than ten Commandments, as they do not consecrate mount Gerizim as the chosen place, and count as the first commandment the opening verse of the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord thy God" - words which do not form an actual commandment. This opening phrase is part and parcel of the first commandment, which the Samaritans believe is "Thou shall have no other gods before me", whereas in the Jewish version this verse is the second commandment. The World has accepted the Jewish version and its nine commandments rather than ten commandments of the Samaritan version.

I'd like to conclude with the deep significance of the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, at the foot of mount Gerizim, as it is told in the Gospel according to St. John, chapter 4. Jesus asks her for a drink of water, "Then saith the woman of Samaria unto him, How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest to drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? For the Jews have no dealing with the Samaritans...Our fathers worshipped in this mountain, and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship. Jesus said unto her, Women, believe me, the hour cometh when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet in Jerusalem worship the father". Jesus a Jew and future father of Christianity, prophecies that in future worship in Jerusalem shall cease, a prophecy well in accordance with Samaritan belief, although it is 2000 years since. The question remains regarding the future of Samaritan belief in mount Gerizim.

As to that, the fact that this Jewish state called Israel, rather than Judaea or "the Jewish state" causes the Samaritans pride and joy. The Samaritans fulfill their duties to the state and certainly partake of the privileges it gives them, regard it as their state and pray for it's well-being. The state of Israel recognizes the Samaritans as Israelis, and in their I.D.'S they are registered as Jews. The Samaritans celebrate Israel's Independence Day as the only additional festival beyond the 7 Pentateuch festivals. But, the Samaritan, in his daily prayers - morning and evening, every Saturday and holiday, swears and declares "And mount Gerizim Beth-El all the days of our lives" - that is, the faith in mount Gerizim is the very essence of a Samaritan's life, his very reason for existence. And indeed, any Samaritan that had cut himself off or was cut off from mount Gerizim was lost and is no more, this daily prayer epitomizes the secret of the Samaritan existence - Mount Gerizim Beth-El all the day of our lives.

Israel Tsedaka