

Samaritan Passover 2011 - Journal Entry of Sharon Sullivan

By: Sharon Sullivan

It all began on a Tuesday, April 12. The morning started with Celeste, Aaron and I on our regular bus that leaves Holon at 6 a.m. and arrives in Jerusalem at 7 a.m. Celeste was on the edge of her bus seat, so excited to be free of her blue school uniform jumper and in jean shorts, a chic hat, and lunch packed for the school field trip. The 5th graders on down were going to "Banana Land" in Jericho. How I would have loved to see that ancient city, but could not finagle it since I had a 30 minute presentation on the Samaritans (all in Hebrew) to give to the MA Hebrew Ulpan students that same day, and a meeting with a fellow MA Hebrew U student from Poland about the field trip we were organizing for the MA students to attend the Samaritan Passover of 2011. These were hectic days of activity to be sure.

At last we arrived in Jerusalem, made our way to our favorite bakery, with our favorite baker never asking what we want to order - just smiling at us as he prepared our regular wake up brew of cappuccino and hot cocoas. Off the kids went to school on bus 20, and off I went to the university on bus 26. It was the last day of classes for the kids and I just before Passover (Easter) break, and we walked a little faster on our way knowing great things were ahead. Aaron's school day ended early, and he was on his way home to Holon. The kids know the bus routes and the drivers like they are carpooling mothers. When my Hebrew presentation ended, I sighed "oy" in traditional Hebrew exaggeration of the pain it caused my brain to speak and think in Hebrew for a verbal presentation. Next came my meeting with my dear friend, Weronika, who towers over me with her bright freckled face and curly dark hair. Together we figured out how to get 20+ Hebrew University MA students from all seven continents of the world to the West Bank for the Samaritan Passover. Everything was going smooth. I rushed to the central bus station, feeling so hungry. It was 2 p.m. and I had not had anything since the cappuccino in the early morning. I sat down inside the central bus station cafe and ordered shakshuka (egg fried in a small black cast-iron pan of tomato/red pepper sauce and fresh bread). Now there was only the wait for Celeste to return from her school field trip and rush home on the 3:30 bus, leaving us only one hour to pack before our friend Ehmahd drove us to Mount Gerizim. It was nearing 3:30 and Celeste still was not back, but eventually the school secretary called and said the bus was late. It meant we would not catch the 3:30 bus home, but must take the 4:30 bus home with no time to pack. I called the boys who were at home and instructed them quickly on what to pack. About 30 minutes later I see Celeste at the entrance of the cafe waving at me to come out. I waved at her to come in. She hesitated, but eventually she came in.

She had a sheepish look on her face. It was then I saw it. There in her hand was a tiny baby chick, peeping away. I could not believe it. I was shocked, I was frantic, I was

doubly shocked. I asked her, from where, why, and what were you thinking - all questions jumbling together. She said that every single student got a chick or a baby rabbit, and best of all --- "It was only 10 shekels!" Here in Israel it is real common in any area (even very populated cities) for kids to have baby chicks and attempt to raise them. Most of them die. Every morning we pass in our very neighborhood two big male roosters, so beautiful in color and so noisy - they are free roaming, and add such charm to the monotonous typical neighborhoods. She and I dreamed that one day we would have roosters too, and maybe a hen for the eggs. These were the kind of dreams that required a place for them to roam though - at least a yard. Our house was a second story place, with balconies and not a square of grass! What was she thinking? So the little chick accompanied us on our one hour bus ride home. Celeste was exhausted from her day of fun in Jericho, and I alone listened to the little guy peeping loudly at every curve in the road. Still I had to pack, and now I had to get rid of that bird!

We arrived home and I immediately put Mathieu in action to go to the house in our neighborhood with roosters and donate the chick as an adoptee in their nontraditional rooster family of two. However, the lady of the house did not like the idea. Off Mathieu went to others, but no one was swayed by the little fluffy chick. Mathieu called me, and I made it clear that our ride to the mountain was arriving any moment and that he must not return with a chick in his hands. So then Mathieu trotted quick to the pet store. Not interested. In desperation he went to the park, opened the cage door, and bid the little guy "good luck."

Back home, I was hastily packing, whilst Celeste was fretting over the baby chick. I walked Mathieu to a barrage of questions she demanded to know. At the same time our ride arrived and we moved as fast as we could to haul the things we would need for the next 10 days in the West Bank on Mount Gerizim.

At last we arrived on Mount Gerizim. It was late evening, and the Samaritan neighborhood high atop the Mountain was echoing with soft sounds of chatting. The neighborhood contained at this time only half of the holiday resident Samaritans. The other half were still in Holon waiting until the Holiday drew closer. We, with a few others, chose to arrive early. I love the Mount Gerizim neighborhood of Samaritans. It is so unique and quite different from the Samaritan neighborhood in Holon, where I live. There are a few less Samaritans in this neighborhood than my neighborhood in Holon. In addition, the location in the fertile West Bank, at the top of the mountain just adds to the blessing that descends upon those gathering there. I began feeling happy again. The anger about the chick was now turning into a bit of guilt at the sad look on Celeste's face. So quietly she and I talked about "what went wrong." Together we figured out that the problem was the timing, the spontaneity of not calling me to ask (when she had a cell phone to do so), and the frazzled nerves and tension in knowing we had to get out the door to not make our friend frustrated in waiting for us. We went to bed in a peaceful pink bedroom, where our Torah teacher, Batya, once lived, until she died one year ago. We slept so deeply in the heart of the Holy Land, in the Month of Spring, the first of the Biblical Months (the original calendar), under a crisp night sky.

The next day was brimming with activity. I took a taxi to Nablus (an Arab town with a bad reputation as of late - but more hype than fact). The winding road from the top of the mountain down into the center of Nablus, which is wedged snugly between two mountains is ancient and picturesque. Goats scramble to cross the road before the taxi turns the next sharp corner in front of them. This is an old city with winding narrow cobbled streets that wind in an endless maze. I went to the market and bought so many vegetables and fruits, and paid only 70 shekels (about 20 dollars), for what would cost me over \$100 back in the USA. I felt a little guilty it was so cheap.

The next days leading up to the Friday Sabbath were busy with preparation for Passover. Friday morning arrived and the full 750 Samaritans from the two neighborhoods of Holon and Gerizim were now all together as one body in the one neighborhood of Gerizim. A holiday spirit of families reunited and conversing from a sentence of Hebrew to a reply in Arabic was commonplace. I envied their family reunion, and found myself missing my parents, siblings, and relatives in Canada. I felt "different" from the others a bit. There are five Samaritan families that make up the 750 Samaritans: The Cohen family (all priests), Marhiv Family, Tsedaka Family, Yehoshua Family, and Sassoni Family. All of these families have lineages in which name after name, year after year, they trace back a heritage to the time of the sons/grandsons of Jacob: Manasseh, Ephraim and Levi.

The house of Batya, where we were staying, was now empty of nearly everything. There is no Jewish matzot crackers among the Samaritans, and nothing that is factory made, or prepackaged. Everything, even spices are bought whole and then dried. Milk is store bought, bottled water is store bought, eggs are store bought, and plain rice is store bought - everything else consists of vegetables, fruits, and Samaritan (levitically koshered) slaughtered meat. Friday night arrives and the last of the meat is cooked. No more meat must remain in any of the houses, as well as all things leavened removed. The men and boys walk to the synagogue on Friday night one hour before sunset to sing together the prayers that have been sung for hundreds of years, written by the poetic sages of the Samaritans of long ago. When the men and boys return from the evening prayer, all gather around the table for the Bracha, and then everyone eats happily.

Saturday morning I awoke with a headache and homesickness. The boys were at the synagogue at 3:30 a.m. (which is traditional every Saturday morning), while Celeste snoozed, and I sat alone sipping tea from the thermos of hot water that was boiled before the sunset. In the haste of packing I did not bring Tylenol. The tea helps a little and I try not to think about my family who is thousands of miles away. I try to convince myself that even if I were there in my hometown at this moment, that none of my family would be celebrating this ancient holiday - and so there is no justified excuse for feeling sad. I remember words of wisdom last passover told to me when I felt a feeling of family longing at the holiday: "Abraham began his holidays with a small circle of five family members in the beginning - his wife, his slave wife, his two sons, and his nephew Lot." I try to think positive about how fortunate I am to have such great children, and that we are all together, healthy, all excited for the holiday, all privileged to have such a unique life experience. It did not work. I cried instead. Now my head really hurt.

At 6 a.m. the boys returned home, showing no mercy on Celeste sleeping as they loudly proclaimed "time for Parasha." The parasha is usually at 6:30 a.m., after the early morning prayers end, and lasts for about an hour. Extended families come together and sit on the floor of a soft carpet and with all heads covered in holy reverence read the weekly Torah reading. The whole Torah (first five books of the Bible) will be read in full by the end of the 7th Biblical month. All of the adults and children read in Ancient Hebrew, and Chant in Ancient Hebrew. My children sit in the circle as fully fledged members of the Tsedaka family. This family contains the male leaders of the eldest, Benyamim Tsedaka and his son Roey, Benyamim's brother Yefet Tsedaka and his two sons Tamir (and daughter Danielle of 8 years) and Bary, cousins Danny Tsedaka, and his brother Rhanahn Tsedaka, Danny's two sons Sassy and Asher, and my four children. All assemble together and read about a paragraph or two (it is a practice from ancient days that determined the break of each reader, and how long each passage is for each reader), beginning with the oldest member in the circle and then going to his right and continuing for the full circle. The kids returned home to me after that, and all of us went back to sleep. I wished I had not missed the reading. I never miss the reading in general, except when I am impure (which is according to the Torah law, and practice of the Samaritans).

When Celeste and I woke up we went for a long walk with Sully, our dog. It was quiet and warm in the sunshine, and my head felt better, and my nerves a little calmer. The Shabbat eventually drew to a close and Passover was coming fast.

When Sunday morning, April 17th arrived, the neighborhood was alive with preparations. Students from the University arrived and I went into action organizing them for a lecture Benny Tsedaka prepared. They had so many questions, and so little time. We then took a tour of the Samaritan museum, and when we finished with the museum I insisted that I had to hurry back to my children and prepare them for Passover. Off I ran to the house to help the children get their clothes together for the holiday, and see what else in last minute things remained.

I entered the house and found Joshua sitting in the kitchen looking more sick than I had seen him in a long time. His face and arms, which previously were suffering from allergy rashes were driving him to the point of insane itching. He begged me to take him to the doctor because he knew he could not sleep that night feeling that way. The clock was just before noon, and by 3 p.m. I knew we would be busy with the Samaritan Passover, with everyone gathering together in the center of the neighborhood, with 50 male lambs all under one year of age in tow. I never knew a lamb of 3 months in age was such a giant! In case you are wondering, it takes 50 lambs to feed 750 people! However, my lamb Joshua was at the heart of my thoughts and so his health was a priority.

Friends arranged for Joshua and I to quickly taxi to a doctor down in Nablus (a ten minute drive). We arrived in the doctor's office with the driver doing all the talking for us in Arabic (I speak only Hebrew, which should never be done in Nablus!) The cost he told me was 50 shekels. "That was it?!" I thought in shock at the cheap cost. For 50 shekels Joshua had a needle to his rear-end of steroid and antihistamine, and an exam of

all the rashes on his body, and sent off with a prescription. That 30 minute doctor visit cost only about \$15 USD. Perhaps I would be a rich woman if I lived in Nablus, I pondered. At the pharmacy the three new medications were filled for 180 shekels, which is about \$50 USD. I was content Josh would be okay through the holiday now. We arrived back in the neighborhood around 4 p.m., rushed to dress and made our way to the middle of the center of the neighborhood where the gate was opened to specially invited guests and all Samaritans. As Josh and I reached the gate, the gatekeeper saw us and opened immediately. To my surprise 3 men tried to push in. The tourists had come out in force! The gatekeeper insisted the three tourists back off, and argued that the members of the community be admitted to their own sacred event. So we entered to the welcome of friends we passed by while walking in, all asking if Josh was okay. Josh felt dizzy and horrible from the shot, but nevertheless he "sat." I sat beside him. Several Samaritans approached us and told me to take him home. After about 30 minutes Josh and I agreed it was best that he go home. His face was one big red rash, and his butt hurt, and he felt dizzy. I left him to sleep it off, while I made my way back through the throng of Samaritans, equal in number to the throng of tourists, paparazzi style photographers, reporters, students, etc...

It was now nearing 7 p.m. and the sun was going down. In the air was the song of the Samaritans that drowned out any chatter the tourists tried to make. Their prayers, sung in Ancient Hebrew, all together loudly in unison reverberated from the top of the sacred mountain. At last the sun dropped, and twilight arrived. The High Priest sang in solo the end of the prayer, and all at once the lambs were wrestled to the ground. There on their sides, pinned down by a heavy little boy atop each, a highly skilled Samaritan slaughterer slit each lamb throat with a knife so sharp it looks like it is slicing butter. I stood behind my daughter and three sons, watching. Aaron was atop of the sheep, which is still writhing after the cut. I didn't like to see the sheep still fighting for life. Such a force the will to live, I thought. He kicks for nearly five minutes. They told me that although he is kicking he is dead because no blood is going to his brain. The cut was so deep. I still could not stand to see it move. Finally all the animals were truly still, and all were quickly skinned, gutted and prepared for the spit. It is a spit that is about 10 feet in length, and looks like a spear of wood. All the parts not allowed to be eaten are put on a big burning grated blaze. Not one bone of the animal is broken. It is shish-kabobbed through its middle and put into a deep burning 10 foot pit with about 4 other sheep. The pits were covered with a cover and then mud over that. The work at last is done. The lambs will be fully roasted by midnight. When the time comes to eat, the lambs are pulled from the pits, put on giant trays and carried to the family homes in which the members of the Saturday parasha (mentioned above) are all assembled. The lamb is eaten in a hurry, as the Exodus text states, shoes on. No utensils are used, but gently the tender meat is pulled by the fingers and put in the homemade soft Samaritan matzot with bitter herbs. The first bite of the matzot, hot roasted lamb, with green bitter herb is fabulous.

When we finish the remains are brought to the big burning blaze so nothing of it remains overnight, according to the Biblical text and true to this ancient holiday repeated every year.

All are content, sitting under a star-filled Middle Eastern sky in the Holy Land. We close our eyes when we at last rest our heads upon our pillows and dream of the Sons of Israel who after their feast began walking out of Egypt. This part of the holiday we practice only in our imagination.