

# **Samaritan Political Identity - Part II**

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## **Part II**

### **General reasons behind Samaritan political mobilization**

The second half of this thesis is mainly devoted to the phenomenon of Samaritan political mobilization on their own behalf in order to gain a voice in the ongoing negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, or at least in the decisions which directly pertain to the future of Nablus and Mount Gerizim. By seeking involvement, the Samaritans are reversing their long standing reluctance to take a stand on political issues, in the hope that both sides will be aware of their needs and take them into account. The fact that the Samaritans feel that it is necessary to become an independent party to the negotiations demonstrates a fundamental difference between them and some other ethnic minority groups which inhabit the areas controlled by Israel. For example, the Druze, despite the fact that an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement could lead to a separation between the Galilee and Golan communities, have not attempted to advocate their position to the negotiating parties as the Samaritans have. Therefore, the reasons behind Samaritan political mobilization must be discussed here.

The academic term used to describe this new direction of the Samaritan community is "ethnopolitics," or the politicalization of an ethnic group. The start of an ethnopolitical movement marks the beginning of a community's campaign to air their social, cultural and economic interests or grievances in the political arena.<sup>1</sup> It demonstrates the metamorphosis of a previously passive group into a political competitor which hopes to influence, or in some cases even force, its interests upon the state.<sup>2</sup> To explain the general reasons behind this change, Professor Milton J. Esman writes:

Mobilization may be the result of events that seriously threaten the community or, alternatively, present opportunities too promising or attractive to resist. Some events may present, simultaneously, potential threats and unexpected opportunities. Periods of political transition such as the dissolution of multinational states or rapid

fresh opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

In order to apply this model to the Samaritans, an insinuating incident is needed to demonstrate why their community, whose positive development as a group was greatly assisted by the State of Israel, has recently decided to bypass the Israeli government and to begin an independent campaign in order to ensure that its special status and rights will be recognized by Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and the international community. Most ethnic communities that become politicized have the ultimate goal of either obtaining hegemony over the state, autonomy within the state, or equitable inclusion into the state (nondiscrimination).<sup>4</sup> In this case, the Samaritans are different from the norm. They seek a recognition by both sides of their special status as one indivisible group who should not be subject to any future political border that would divide them. While not advocating autonomy for their people, the Samaritans nevertheless desire a privileged position among the region's inhabitants so that they will enjoy the freedom to cross a hypothetical Israeli-Palestinian political border in any given situation. The incident that sparked Samaritan political mobilization is clearly the Oslo peace process, which has succeeded in spreading a certain amount of anxiety among the Samaritans that, eventually, they will be divided between two political entities once again. Samaritan anxiety has been heightened by developments over the past six years, which have seen Israel accept the principle of trading "land for peace" as a precondition to its participation in the 1991 Madrid Conference, Oslo I - which saw the transfer of some Israeli-held areas to Palestinian autonomous rule, and Oslo II - after which the city of Nablus (including the Samaritan quarter) and partial control of Qiryat Luza, among other populated areas, were handed over to the Palestinian National Authority.

The first half of this work was designed to acquaint the reader with how the events of the past century have affected the Samaritan community, in order to understand their present situation. Without a doubt, the most important period of time for the Samaritans was their enforced separation from 1948 to 1967, which has since influenced their outlook towards the conflict being fought around them. The Samaritan preoccupation with the survival of their people over the past decades has thus been redefined from a matter of population numbers and economic subsistence to include the unhindered fellowship of its members. The outcome of the 1967 War reunited the community, and thus efforts to undo its territorial effects are inimical to Samaritan interests.

The Oslo Accords were the push that began Samaritan political activity because they were the first negotiated agreements between Israel and the Palestinians, and they were designed to alter the territorial status quo established in 1967. The Samaritans are faced

in which the Nablus and Holon communities enjoy free access to each other. But rather than voice opposition to the peace process, the Samaritans seek to work within it - in an attempt to influence the negotiators and sponsors not to forget them. Like the 1949-1967 period, it is a situation in which the patriotic feelings of individual Samaritans to the State of Israel or to a possible Palestinian state must be subordinate to communal interests. The danger for the Samaritans clearly lies in the possibility that the two political entities will opt for peace and territorial division regardless of the effect that this will have on the six hundred member community.

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### **Leadership in the Community**

The current system of leadership of both the Holon and Nablus communities is marked by a slight departure from the traditional style of having the Samaritan High Priest serve as the sole authority over all of the community members. The High Priest is still the unquestioned leader, but many of the non-religious concerns are handled by two elected councils which serve the Holon and Nablus Samaritans, respectively.

Both Israeli and Jordanian law have maintained the status of the High Priest as defined under the Ottoman millet system, whereby the High Priest is recognized as the religious authority and representative for the Samaritans. He is responsible for laws within the community which relate to birth, marriage and death.<sup>5</sup> The High Priest is chosen on the basis of his being the head of the priestly family, which traces its ancestry to Itamar, the son of Aaron. The division of the community from 1949 to 1967 required that the Samaritans within Israel adapt themselves to the absence of the High Priest. Thus, Yefet ben Abraham Tsedaka, the founder of the Holon neighborhood and recognized leader of the community outside Nablus, was given authority by the High Priest to perform marriages and other religious functions.

Following the 1967 war, both communities decided to establish seven member councils which would determine important secular matters in both Nablus and Holon, such as the use of the funds granted by the Israeli government to the community. The councils were elected to two year terms by both populations, and the elected members chose one individual from among themselves to serve as the Secretary (or Chairman) of the Committee. This practice was altered in 1993, when the head of the council began to be directly elected by the population, and was given the title "Secretary of the Community."<sup>6</sup> Presently, both of the councils, headed by their respective Secretaries, tend to focus on matters of Samaritan development and population growth, particularly in Oirvat Luza. In recent years, both councils have allocated funds to establish the

a Samaritan museum on Mount Gerizim and a library in Holon.

The role of both of these councils has been unwittingly challenged by the present political circumstances. One of the functions of the council, in particular the Secretary of the Community, has been to serve as a liaison between the community and the outside authority (mainly Israel). Among several points of contact, there are three Israeli figures of direct significance to the community: the Mayor of Holon, the Head of the Israeli Civil Administration in Nablus, and the Minister of Religious Affairs. Similarly, the mayor of Nablus has been the official point of contact with the Palestinians. However, the current diplomatic activities have expanded Samaritan outside contacts beyond Israel and the Palestinians to include the United States and the United Kingdom. These actions have, to the large part, been dominated by Benyamim Tsedaka, the co-editor of the biweekly A. B. - The Samaritan News. Although he does not hold an elected office in the community, his activities have been sanctioned by the High Priest and his prominence has risen accordingly. Likewise, the allotment of a seat for a Samaritan in the Palestinian Council (the circumstances of which will be discussed later) has caused Representative Saloum ben Amram to be the predominant liaison between the Palestinians and the Samaritans, particularly because he has a direct access to PNA President Yasser Arafat.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the recently created positions of a PNA Samaritan Parliament Member and (for lack of an official term) a Samaritan "Ambassador," the community members have recently expressed an overwhelming desire to establish a Supreme Samaritan Religious Council to assist the High Priest in religious matters.<sup>8</sup> The precise role of such a body has not been determined, though there does not appear to be any desire to diminish the stature of the High Priest nor challenge his authority. Unlike the two councils already in existence, the religious council would be elected by the whole community and thus serve both halves. Such a council could represent Samaritan concerns to the Chief Rabbinate of Israel over issues such as Samaritan-Jewish marriages and divorces.<sup>9</sup>

The transformation of the Samaritan leadership structure from one based solely on the High Priest to that of a system incorporating elected councils has, in the words of Schur, not always been "easy and smooth."<sup>10</sup> In a society as small as the Samaritans, it is difficult to objectively choose officials. Social relationships, family ties and personal rivalries have inevitably affected the electoral process. For example, the predominance of the Altif family in Nablus/Qiryat Luza has led to the provision that the Secretary of the Community there will always be a member of that family, even if an outsider receives more votes.<sup>11</sup> But conversely, because of the community's small size, it can be taken for granted that every individual Samaritan can air his or her desires or grievances to any Samaritan leader, whether at a community meeting or at an informal house call. But no matter who holds leadership positions, the ultimate authority in the

matters, his office continues to remain the most popular and revered position in the community. It is therefore the function of the High Priest to sanction all political activity undertaken by the community, and unlike the two Secretaries of the Community, the High Priest's position has remained unaffected by the recent political developments.

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### **"A. B. - The Samaritan News"**

The main source of information on the Samaritan reaction to the Oslo Accords for this work has been the biweekly Samaritan newspaper, A. B. - The Samaritan News. Established in 1969 by Benyamim and Yefet Tsedaka, the two grandsons of former Holon community founder Yefet Tsedaka, the newspaper has gradually become an internally and externally acknowledged voice of the community. The two brothers had merely sought to create a forum for Samaritan expression, and for topics relating to the Holon and Nablus communities (both current and historical events). They later admitted that they did not believe that their biweekly periodical, now in its twenty-eighth year of publication, would survive for as long as it has.<sup>12</sup>

Professor Benedict Anderson expounded upon the importance of newspapers as a means of uniting communities and nations in his book *Imagined Communities*. In that work, the newspaper is seen as a communal thread by which all members of a group become aware of each others' existence not only by reading about matters which affect the group as a whole, but by sharing in common the practice of reading the newspaper itself, i.e. getting information from the same source at the same time - a commonality that unites members of large nations or groups with co-members that they have never met, nor have had any personal contact with.<sup>13</sup> However, the small population of the Samaritans appears to make them an exception to this idea, since all have had contact with their fellow community members (even if only during religious celebrations), and their group identity was well established before the advent of print media. There are many roles that A. B. - The Samaritan News plays both within and outside the community, but unlike the Arabic language newspapers which appeared in Cairo and Beirut in the 19th century, it did not help to create the Samaritan identity. Instead it helps to sustain the Samaritan communal identity in the same manner that the "Good Wishes" radio programs had done between 1949-1967. By printing birth, marriage and death announcements, and accounts of holiday celebrations, it keeps the community members up to date with co-members whom they might see only during the holidays, and informs those who (due to health reasons) were unable to attend those celebrations.

of whom would not have used such an opportunity if they did not have a forum of their own.<sup>14</sup> He cites one of its prime results as keeping "... the flame of Samaritan nationhood burning."<sup>15</sup> Yet, the novelty of having their own newspaper drew criticism from some Samaritans themselves, who were sensitive to the fact that in such a small community, there would always be articles published which would refer to individual members directly or indirectly. The editors of A. B. - The Samaritan News recounted this opposition in a 1989 issue of A. B. Echoes (their yearly compilation of Samaritan-related articles in the world media), stating that many Samaritans expressed great sensitivity: ... to each word printed in the journal; in searching for hidden motives behind every phrase; in loud aggressive outcries against the appearance of a journal, indifference towards the editors and the use of pressure upon potential writers, to stop them from lending their hand to writing in the journal ...<sup>16</sup>

Rival newspapers were also begun in the early 1970's, but were all short lived. Over time, opposition subsided as the novelty of A. B. - The Samaritan News wore off and many began to see the usefulness of the periodical as a necessary vehicle, not only for Samaritan literary expression, but also as a means of keeping them updated on aspects of current political events affecting them which do not always make their way into the mass media. To the student of Samaritan studies, A. B. - The Samaritan News is an invaluable resource, not only for tracing the modern developments of the community, but also for reporting details of archaeological discoveries and reprinting historical works both by and about the Samaritans. The diversity of its readers is symbolized by the fact that each newspaper contains articles in: a) modern Hebrew, for Holon Samaritans and Israeli subscribers; b) ancient Hebrew, for all Samaritans - and certainly a benefit for the those studying the script of their religious liturgy; c) Arabic, for the Nablus Samaritans and Palestinian readers; and d) English, for subscribers worldwide.

The Samaritans, though already literate in Arabic, modern Hebrew, or both, have certainly benefited from the use of ancient Hebrew as a forum for communicating modern events. Thus, the newspaper is revolutionary not only because it publishes in four alphabets, but more importantly because it has taken the ancient Hebrew language and script out of its confines as a language of prayer and sacred text, and placed it in a more mundane setting. Co-editor Benyamim Tsedaka even worked with a computer specialist to develop a font for the script in order to print such articles in his newspaper. But for all of the disquiet over the foundation of the newspaper, there does not seem to be any resistance within the community to the use of ancient Hebrew in a periodical. At the risk of speculating, this may be because of the fact that its use is commonly recognized as a unifying factor between the Holon and Nablus communities - a language and text of special significance to Samaritans alone. While the modern

meant for consumption by the community as a whole. The importance that A. B. - The Samaritan News has gained over the past 27 years has now made it an integral part of the Samaritan community, and of primary interest to outside researchers. Last year (1997), a Samaritan reader went so far as to praise the newspaper as:

... the indisputable voice of the Community, bringing its message to the world regarding the Community's general condition and what it needs to promote its social and economic future.<sup>17</sup>

Whatever its founding purposes, A. B. - The Samaritan News is of vital importance as the platform for political discussions and concerns from within the Samaritan people, thus serving as a mechanism to trace the political mobilization of the ethnic community and a primary source for the reactions of the Samaritans to the larger events taking shape around them.

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### **The Law of Return controversy and Samaritan-Orthodox Jewish relations**

Besides the Oslo process, another background to the current political mobilization of the Samaritans may lie in the attempt by the Israeli Government to revoke the Samaritan inclusion in the Law of Return. This occurred under the Rabin Administration in 1992, when Shas MK Aryeh Deri was the Interior Minister. The Ministry, acting upon the 1970 Law of Return legislation which defined a Jew as the child of a Jewish mother, stopped issuing immigrant visas to Samaritans from Nablus. Since the period of Yitzhaq Ben-Zvi, Nablus Samaritans had been free to move to Israel in the same manner that Jews from Arab countries had been encouraged to immigrate. Due to the greater economic opportunities and the higher level of stability and security in Israel, a number of Samaritans from Nablus did move to Holon and become Israeli citizens, while those left behind officially remained Jordanian citizens under Israeli military rule (like the Palestinians of the West Bank). There were so many Nablus Samaritans that managed to relocate over the past fifty years that the community is now evenly divided between the two cities. Thus, the efforts of the Interior Ministry generated a great deal of shock among the community, as the significance of the Ministry's action was daunting. Nablus Samaritans, hitherto regarded as equals with Jewish immigrants, now faced a severe barrier in obtaining Israeli citizenship if they chose to move to Holon.

But the cause for Samaritan outrage ran much deeper than the question of immigration.



decades. It appeared that the Israeli government was moving away from its view of the Samaritans as equal citizens with Jews as a result of ultra-Orthodox pressure. The Interior Ministry, controlled by Shas, was indeed reflecting the long-standing attitude of Orthodox Judaism towards the Samaritans.

Despite the feelings of affinity by secular Zionists towards the Samaritans, Orthodox Jews continue to view the community as non-Israelites. It must be remembered that the certificate issued by the Chief Rabbi in 1841, while declaring them to be a "branch of the Children of Israel," stopped short of saying that they were "Jews."<sup>18</sup> But even if the Chief Rabbi's use of this phrase implied that he considered them "Israelites," his ruling would be strongly disputed by Orthodox Jews today. For the Orthodox, there is no perceived ethnic tie between the two peoples, since the Jewish scriptures declare the Samaritans to be the descendants of foreigners brought by the Assyrians to populate the Samarian region. On matters of Jewish religious law (Halacha), there exist two different approaches towards the Samaritans in Talmudic literature, reflecting an evolving perception of the community during the post-Second Temple period. The earlier writings allowed Jews to eat, drink and co-habitate with Samaritans, and even permitted a Samaritan to perform a circumcision ceremony on a Jewish child. This general attitude was expressed in the Palestinian Talmud by the saying, "Every commandment which the Samaritans keep, they are more scrupulous in observing than Jews."<sup>19</sup> But later writings in the Babylonian Talmud forbade all of these activities, accused the Samaritans of idolatry, and excommunicated them altogether. Its commentaries on the Samaritans concluded by asking, "When shall we take them back?" to which the reply stated, "When they renounce Mount Gerizim and accept Jerusalem and the resurrection of the dead."<sup>20</sup> It is thus apparent that what occurred in 1992 was an attempt to reimpose the traditional Orthodox Jewish view of the Samaritans over the existing secular Israeli law that had hitherto considered a Samaritan to be (for all legal intents and purposes) a Jew. Between Israeli Jews and Israeli Samaritans, there exist two different concepts of what the country named "Israel" actually represents. For Jews, Israel is the Jewish State. But for Samaritans in Holon, Israel is the "Israelite" State, whereby (as mentioned in the introduction) Jews and Samaritans together constitute the Israelite nation. The 1992 controversy was over more than mere semantics. It was a serious conflict between the Holon Samaritans' communal identity and patriotic identity, going beyond an instance in which their state was taking actions detrimental to their people. Here, the state was calling the very nature of Samaritan citizenship into question. Refuting the legal Jewish identity of the Samaritans meant, by default, that they were not natural (i.e. Jewish) citizens of the Jewish State. While to the Samaritans, the concept of a "Jewish Samaritan" is an oxymoron, the more nationalist-based classification of an "Israeli Samaritan" is precisely what most of the Holon residents have seen themselves as. Thus, from a



represents, the abrogation of the Samaritans' legal status as "Jews" was seen as a state effort to deny their identity as Israelites.

The Ministry's decision drew a strong reaction from A. B. - The Samaritan News, which angrily reminded its readers of the thousands of years that the Samaritans had lived in the land before the establishment of Israel and asked:

Do those who perpetuate and believe in this [Israelite] tradition require the

recognition of newcomers? No, the Israeli Samaritans do not need recognition of their Israeli identity from any person or any entity in the State of Israel.<sup>21</sup> When interviewed by The Jerusalem Post, co-editor Benyamim Tsedaka stated, "We never dreamed that the state we dreamed about for years would one day make it hard for us."<sup>22</sup> Another, Yitzhaq Cohen, complained in the same article that, "As long as the Interior Ministry is in the hands of Shas, they will never do anything to favor the Samaritans. If possible, they will take away rights."<sup>23</sup> However, fortunately for the Samaritans, the issue proved to be a temporary scare after an appeal to the Israeli Supreme Court settled the matter in their favor. The Court's ruling in March 1994 reaffirmed the right of a Samaritan to receive an immigration visa from Israel, and furthermore assured them of the same treatment that the Israeli government had given to the Samaritan immigrants from Nablus from 1948 onwards.<sup>24</sup>

The calling into question of the right of a Samaritan to be accepted as an equal citizen in the Jewish State was largely at the bidding of some extreme religious factions in the country. In most other cases, more secular-minded Israelis exhibit either ignorance, indifference or academic curiosity towards the Samaritans, not unlike the secular Zionist settlers at the beginning of this century. Israel Tsedaka pointed out an axiom of this Samaritan experience, saying that, "Every time the Jew is more religious, his respect for the Samaritans is less."<sup>25</sup> Benyamim Tsedaka argued that the foundation of Orthodox-Samaritan relations is 99% based upon, "... misunderstanding and misknowledge of the Samaritan situation. They know nothing about the Samaritans." But he went on to assure that the manifestations of resistance towards the Samaritans was, "... in reality the stuff of talk and not action."<sup>26</sup> The Chief Rabbinate and the Samaritans do not mutually recognize each other, and so the Samaritan marriages and divorces can only be performed by their own priests.<sup>27</sup> There exists a future threat for the Samaritans if those religious parties which show hostility to the Samaritans continue to gain in political power. Likewise, if intermarriage with Jewish women continues at a higher frequency, a battle may occur over the identity of the future generations of Samaritans owing to the different interpretations of religious

problems.<sup>28</sup>

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## **Relations with Hamas**

The Samaritans living in Nablus have had to face religious extremism of their own, in this case the phenomenon of Islamic activism. The rise of Hamas during the Intifada period generated fears among many Samaritans that the new, more cordial relations between themselves and the Muslims of Nablus could be put at risk. The destruction of a Samaritan store by Hamas activists during the Intifada, because of the fact that it sold liquor, was an isolated incident. But with the 1841 events perpetually in the consciousness of the Samaritans, there was no doubt as to how far such extremism could go if left unchecked. However, while Israeli citizens and Jewish settlers in the occupied territories live in a state of virtual siege due to violent actions by groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the activists seem to view the Samaritans in much the same light as Palestinian Christians.

From the perception of Islamic leaders, the Samaritans are naturally a part of the people of Palestine. The activists share the opinion of the Palestine National Authority that the Samaritans are the "Jews of Palestine." This particular term arose just before the Palestinian elections of January 1996 when PLO official Nabil Shaath was questioned over the decision to reserve a seat for a Samaritan representative to the Palestinian Council. He is said to have replied, "They are the Jews of Palestine and we want a Jewish candidate."<sup>29</sup> Since that time, despite the fact that the Samaritans consider themselves otherwise, Palestinian official documents have reportedly referred to them by that term.<sup>30</sup> In order to probe more deeply the question of how Islamic activists view the Samaritans, this work relied primarily upon two sources - the traditional doctrine as outlined in the Qur'an and Islamic tradition, and the views of Sheikh Hamid al-Bitawi - a prominent Muslim cleric in Nablus who has been identified in the media as a Hamas leader.

Since the Islamic activists seek to practice, as much as possible, the teachings of Orthodox Islam, it is necessary to discuss how the Samaritans are regarded in traditional Islamic teaching. Whereas religious Jews refer to II Kings 17 as the foundation of their dealings with the Samaritans, the Muslims have two primary sources to rely upon, one with an unfavorable view towards the sect, and another which portrays them much more honorably. Though the Samaritans are not mentioned explicitly in the Qur'an, there is a section in Sura 20 verses 83-97 which tells the story of an individual named al-Samiri who was the man responsible for building the golden

the worship of the calf, he punished al-Samiri with eternal estrangement from other peoples, saying : "... so long as thou livest, thou shalt call out to those that meet thee 'touch me not.'"<sup>31</sup> Many Qur'anic scholars view the traditional Samaritan isolation from outsiders, including their strict laws of purity which forbade physical contact with non-Samaritans in the past, as having its origins from this incident. Conversely, others will see the verses in the Qur'an as an explanation of why this ancient custom came to be. The Encyclopedia of Islam stated that Islamic scholar Ignaz Goldziher viewed al-Samiri as the representative of the Samaritan religion, and had made a collection of Jewish, Christian and Muslim references which demonstrated how contact with non-Samaritans was indeed considered impure. The article concluded, Al-Samiri thus is the representative of Samaritanism, which keeps apart

from non-Samaritans. In a segregation of this kind - as in the Jewish laws regarding eating - Muhammad sees a divine punishment. What has al-Samiri (= the Samaritans) to atone for? For the sin of the golden calf.<sup>32</sup>

This story is a negative reflection upon the Samaritans, and carries much significance because it is a part of the Qur'an. However, there is also a Hadith (tradition of the Prophet) which demonstrates the Prophet Muhammad's respect and benevolence towards the community. According to the tradition, three wise men (a Jew, a Christian and a Samaritan) sought out Muhammad to foretell his future greatness. The Prophet was grateful and convinced the Jew and the Christian to accept Islam. The Samaritan, though keeping to his religion, managed to impress the Prophet even more than his companions by remarking upon a blemish between the Muhammad's shoulders which was the mark of prophecy. In return, Muhammad promised to the Samaritans as a whole both their right to live in peace, and the freedom of conscience.<sup>33</sup>

The experience of the Samaritans under Islamic rule is controversial when one takes into account the various discrepancies and viewpoints. The conquest of Palestine by the armies of Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattab was certainly a positive development for the Samaritans since it freed them from cruel persecution by the Byzantine Empire. When questioned as to the general nature of Muslim-Samaritan relations over time, Sheikh Hamid al-Bitawi related a conversation between himself and a Samaritan friend in which he asked if the Samaritans had faced persecution or other injustices under Muslim rule. According to Sheikh Bitawi, the Samaritan told him:

Let me say for the record, and I am not not trying to flatter you but I want this to go on record for the sake of history, ... that the happiest days for the Samaritans were those days which they lived with the Muslims. ... If we ask Samaritans, if the Samaritan sect had lived during that period in a country like India or some other such country, we

centuries of Muslim rule - from half a million at the time of the conquest to 146 in 1918. Israel Tsedaka from Holon stated:

If you learn the Samaritan history, you know that the Samaritans and the Arabs - for nearly 1400 years, the situation of the Samaritans was very hard ... We know that this half million that remained here for 1400 years never left this place.. Where are these people?<sup>35</sup>

It is known that many converted to Islam, as many families in Nablus and the West Bank carry names that show that they were once Samaritan. But the controversial question in Samaritan eyes is as to whether they were converted freely or by force. The 1841 attempt to extinguish the Samaritans would seem to provide evidence to many that at least some of these conversions were done by force.

Looking back to 1841, it must be remembered that the pretense of the 'ulama to persecute the Samaritans was that they were not recognized as People of the Book (Ahl al-Kitab), like the Jews and Christians. However, Sheikh Bitawi would strongly disagree with his predecessors, since he considers them to be a sect of Judaism. In an interview at his home, he clearly stated:

We consider the Samaritans to be members of a Jewish denomination ... It is analogous to what we have in Christianity. We have Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox.<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, as a denomination of Judaism, the Samaritans are entitled to protection in Muslim ruled areas according to Islamic religious law. During the interview, the Sheikh emphasized his belief that the Samaritans were a part of the Jewish religion numerous times, and while he accused them of altering their scripture (a charge likewise leveled against Jews and Christians), he explained that his personal relations with individual Samaritans were based upon a verse from the Qur'an:

Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) Faith, nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loveth those who are just.<sup>37</sup>

Yet, while the Sheikh is a religious leader of the Muslims of Nablus, and rumored to be a Hamas leader, some of the young Muslim activists do not always share his views. When questioned by the author, a few betrayed extremely negative attitudes towards the Samaritans - perhaps owing to their lack of contacts or friends among them, their association of the Samaritans with the Israeli Jews, or both. Criticism was not made on the grounds that the Samaritans were supported by Hamas' popular rival, the PNA.

encouraged by the official policy of viewing the Samaritans as the "Jews of Palestine") that the Samaritans were Israelis -- since some of the activists do not distinguish between the two terms. A few of them expressed the desire to build a mosque either on top of Mount Gerizim or within the neighborhood of Qiryat Luza itself. However, when asked as to the religious significance of Mount Gerizim to Islam (named Jabal at-Tur in Arabic), Sheikh Bitawi replied that there was scarcely any Muslim connection to the place. The only site of interest is a stone structure on the summit, which is believed to be the tomb of one of Salah ad-Din's generals. The Sheikh stated that there was no obligation for Muslims to go and pray there.<sup>38</sup>

The professions of good relations between the Samaritans and the Muslims were recently put to a test in March 1995, when two seven hundred year old Samaritan religious manuscripts were stolen from the Nablus synagogue. Though the area was still under Israeli military control, the Samaritans sought help from PLO Chairman Arafat to get them back. Though they have not yet been recovered as of 1998, the theft generated a great show of support towards the Samaritans from their Palestinian neighbors. The mayor of Nablus announced a \$10,000 award for information regarding the crime, and Arafat established contact with the thieves in an attempt to retrieve the stolen items. In a city-wide meeting held a day after the theft was discovered, Sheikh Bitawi announced that if the thief or thieves were found to be Muslims, they would be excommunicated from Islam prior to prosecution.<sup>39</sup> In an interview over a year later, he maintained this view, saying:

Whoever may have stolen these manuscripts, whether he be a Christian or a Muslim, we declare to Almighty God that we wash our hands of this terrible crime. If the thief or thieves were Muslims, we wash our hands of them and we declare that we are innocent of this crime. We absolutely do not permit any attack against the Samaritan sect, nor do we permit the theft of their religious manuscripts ... If I thought that they had stolen these manuscripts I would undoubtedly enforce the mandatory punishment ... If it is proven that Muslims did this, then Islam is innocent of those people and we demand that the harshest penalties be imposed on those people.<sup>40</sup> Thus, based upon the public statements of Islamic leaders such as Sheikh Bitawi, it would appear that the Samaritans do not face the same dangers of Islamic activism that Israeli Jews risk. There are even words of friendship, and a public acknowledgement that the Samaritans are an indigenous people to Palestine with a right to live there. The events of 1841, while an ominous precedent that will always remain in the consciousness of the small community, do not seem to reflect a current reality. What is troublesome, however, is the fact that their Muslim neighbors do not seem to acknowledge that the Samaritans suffered for centuries under Islamic rule. Therefore, the reassuring words of religious

many hardships and almost became extinct under the 1,400 years of Muslim rule.

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### **The Current Political and Social Climate**

In the contemporary period between the end of the Intifada and the (assumed) future peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, the overall Samaritan situation in Holon and Nablus has remained excellent, despite the one time legal challenge from Jewish fundamentalists on the one hand, and isolated incidents of physical pressure from extremist Palestinian factions on the other. With most of the West Bank remaining under Israeli military control, the Nablus Samaritans, now mostly located in their new neighborhood near the summit of Mount Gerizim, are assured of free access and even immigration opportunities to join their brothers in Holon. They hold jobs in the Israeli Civil Administration, receive aid from the Israeli government (including the salaries of their religious leaders), and protection from the Israeli army. At the same time, their relations with the Palestinians of Nablus have improved, with friendly contacts forged with Palestinians on personal, business and official levels. All of this taken together has created the feeling among many Israelis, Palestinians and Samaritans alike, that the small Samaritan community is a neutral party to the conflict - even a "bridge for peace" as some Samaritans put it. Yet, one 18 year old from Holon countered that there remains an uncertainty for some Israelis and Palestinians as to where the Samaritans stand on crucial political questions.

Most of the time we are trying to be neutral, but both sides think that we have the influence from the other. The Jews say that we are closer to the Arabs, and the Arabs tell us the opposite.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, the Samaritans continue to enjoy a very unique position between the two sides, and as the economic situation of the Nablus community moves closer to that of Holon, the entire community is experiencing its greatest prosperity since ancient times.

The Holon branch, fully integrated into Israeli society according to both law and culture, have continued to enjoy their equal status with the Jewish Israeli citizens. Despite minor confrontations with their immediate neighbors (over the issue of Samaritan marriage celebrations lasting until late at night), there is no barrier to this social integration, and as stated at the beginning of this work, the extremely low drop-out rate from the community demonstrates that the Samaritan citizens of Israel are integrating without assimilating. The Samaritan neighborhood of Neveh Markeh in Holon symbolically shows both their social integration and religious isolation from

the street signs which inform the passerby that he/she is entering the neighborhood betray the fact that this is not a Jewish-Israeli neighborhood. In Qiryat Luza, a ten minute drive up Mount Gerizim from Nablus, the 300 Samaritans there continue to show some social isolation from their Palestinian neighbors. But this is hardly surprising given their physical isolation from the city. There are three Bedouin families living in the neighborhood, though their contact with the Samaritans is usually restricted to business matters (such as buying food from the Samaritan grocery store or being hired as shepherds for the Passover lambs). Palestinian youths and families often make their way up to the top of the mountain for recreational purposes, passing through the small Samaritan neighborhood along the way and interacting with its inhabitants, some of whom are friends from An-Najah University.

The annual Passover celebration still marks the main occasion when the community dwells together on Mount Gerizim in their white villas near the summit. But while the Samaritans are enjoying their formal reunion while observing their principal feast, the tense political situation is clearly revealed by the behavior of the Israeli military, the Palestinians of Nablus and the Samaritans themselves. Security is strengthened, with careful preparations by the IDF to ensure that the celebration passes without incident. Palestinians either avoid the mountaintop on the evening of the sacrifice, or are turned away by the army. But most significantly, the Samaritans from Holon tend to avoid going down into the city of Nablus, remaining in Qiryat Luza for most of the feast. It is evident that the warmer relations prevailing between the Palestinians and the Nablus Samaritans do not extend to the Holon community because of the fact that the Palestinians make a distinction between the two. The Nablus Samaritans are well known in the city, speak Arabic as their native language, and are therefore treated cordially by their neighbors.<sup>42</sup> However, the Holon Samaritans are mostly unknown faces among the Palestinians, and are seen by them in much the same light as Jewish citizens of Israel. As one young man from Holon said, "I am afraid to walk down there, because when I walk down there they stop me and ask if I am Jewish and if I'm from Holon. They can see it on my face."<sup>43</sup> This estrangement from the surrounding Palestinians that some Israeli Samaritans feel when in Nablus may, in turn, reinforce their identity as Israelis, since they perceive that they share the same dangers. However, it does not subtract from their identification with Nablus Samaritans, through whom friendships and associations with some Palestinians (locals and officials alike) have been already been made.

All of this translates into a delicate situation for the Nablus Samaritans in particular, being caught between their neighbors, the army, and their brethren from Hulon. To illustrate this dilemma, a question was put to both the Samaritans from Hulon and from Qiryat Luza, as to how they behave around Israeli soldiers when Palestinians were



security detachment has finished making its rounds? A detailed description of how the dilemma was resolved was unfortunately not forthcoming, resulting in general statements from both that they are very careful. One young man from Hulon explained his strategy of speaking Hebrew to the soldiers and Arabic to the Palestinians,<sup>44</sup> but of course since many Palestinians and Israeli soldiers have learned each others' language, extreme caution is still required.

For both halves of the Samaritan people, the current status quo has been a very beneficial period. The continued economic development, business interactions, and good relations with both parties to the conflict are all important factors, but they are overshadowed by the importance of the freedom of movement between Hulon and Mount Gerizim as a result of their being governed by one political entity. However, the continued conflict raging between the majority communities that they dwell among demonstrates how unappealing the status quo is to Israel and the Palestinians. The years of repressed political, social and economic freedoms on the one hand, and the continuing human and psychological toll of enforcing military occupation on the other, have led to the willingness of both sides to discuss changing the contemporary political realities. Thus, a new perception has been developing since the end of the Intifada that the status quo will give way to a peaceful settlement, possibly resulting in a two-state solution. The Samaritans have therefore had to face the challenge of transforming a situation which is beneficial to them, albeit without peace, into a future that will continue to assure their freedom and security.

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### **Reaction to Peace Process & Oslo**

The Madrid Conference of 1991, while based upon the United Nations resolutions calling for the Israeli withdrawal of captured territories in exchange for peace, did not itself arouse vocal Samaritan concerns. However, the Oslo Agreement between the Israeli government and the Palestine Liberation Organization in September 1993 began a flurry of activity as both halves of the Samaritan people immediately grasped its consequences for their future. The status quo of being unified under Israeli rule was suddenly changing through diplomatic moves from above. The future, while offering a chance for peace, was also threatening to draw a permanent boundary between them. There were no means of guaranteeing that the difficulties of the 1948-1967 period would not return. On October 28, 1993, an editorial in A.B. - The Samaritan News wrote:

The willingness, in principle, of the current Israeli government to transfer areas of

wait for events to shape our future. We must depend on no one but ourselves. Any scenario is now possible for the community's future. Everyone involved is declaring that the recently signed accord is an agreement in principle only, and does not go into details. We must not, however, rely on declarations any longer. Facts are being established behind the scenes, and we may find ourselves faced with a fait accompli, which we have no possibility of changing.<sup>45</sup>

These sentiments symbolized the political awakening of the Samaritan community, directly calling for its mobilization for its own behalf. At this early stage of the Oslo process, it was already apparent that the planned transfer of power from Israeli to Palestinian control in the areas of Gaza and Jericho would eventually be echoed in Nablus and Qiryat Luza.<sup>46</sup> Unofficial Samaritan discussions with both the Israeli government and the PLO soon after the September 1993 Agreement had produced assurances from both sides to guarantee the welfare of the Samaritans under their respective rule. But the question that haunted the minds of most of the Samaritans was: "... who and what will guarantee the welfare of the community as a whole, as well as unimpeded access to Mt. Gerizim?"<sup>47</sup>

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### **Independent Diplomatic Activity**

To find an answer to this question, the Samaritan community decided to engage in independent diplomatic negotiations with the co-sponsor of the Peace Process, the United States, and later with the United Kingdom as well. As early as September 1993, a delegation led by the Deputy High Priest from Nablus and including Holon Community Secretary Ron Sassoni and A.B. - The Samaritan News co-editor Benyamim Tsedaka traveled to the United States in order to make contact with American human rights groups and activists who would be willing to advocate the Samaritan cause with their government. This first-ever diplomatic venture succeeded in finding contact people, who began to hold intensive meetings with United State Senators, Israeli Foreign Ministry officials and the US Department of State during the autumn of 1993. Through the efforts of these proxies, the Samaritans were able to report in A.B. - The Samaritan News in December, 1993, that a future Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement would reportedly include a clause ensuring the future wellbeing of the Samaritans as a whole.<sup>48</sup> The Samaritans themselves meanwhile began holding talks with Israel Lipple, Prime Minister Yitzhaq Rabin's Advisor to the Ministry of Religious Affairs, when the Israeli government had begun examining the right of free passage for its Samaritan, Christian and Muslim citizens into the areas it was vacating after the end of the autonomy period.<sup>49</sup>

Samaritans of their future well-being. The theoretical nature of what would be the future political status of the the region forced the Samaritans to be content with mere promises and assurances from the Israelis, Palestinians and Americans, since actual legislation or action over the undetermined territory was impossible. It was decided to pursue further political activity in order to gain more active American involvement on their behalf. What had been achieved thus far was only an undefined clause in a proposed future agreement. Samaritan leaders realized that they needed to formulate definite goals for what they wanted for the future before they could seek to obtain specific guarantees from those involved in the negotiations. Even Samaritans from Holon were uncertain that Israel would take their interests into account when negotiating the final settlement. The January 16, 1994 commentary in A.B. - The Samaritan News reflected the mood of the community, stating, "There is general agreement on the theme: "If we don't help ourselves, who WILL help us?"<sup>50</sup> It went on to say that the Samaritans as a whole agreed that ongoing political activity should be taken in order to demand free passage between Holon and Mount Gerizim at all times and to increase the American involvement as a guarantee that future agreements would be kept by both of the negotiating partners. "1994 must thus be viewed as a year of greater momentum on the political front, to secure the future of the Samaritan community."<sup>51</sup> The political predicament was featured on an Israeli radio program the following month. Peleg Altif, Secretary of the Nablus/Qiryat Luza community fielded the calls of listeners and reflected an attitude of "embarrassment and gloom" towards the future, no doubt influenced by some of the responses of the audience, both Israeli and Palestinian, and even by Holon Samaritans. A.B. - The Samaritan News reported that while some Israelis were sympathetic, others reacted with anger to the demands of the small community. The Palestinian participants generated a different concern, as their declarations of the "thousands of years" of Arab-Samaritan friendship ran contrary to historical fact, and thus left a feeling that their neighbors in Nablus were ignorant at best or insincere at worst. The article summarized that, "most of the responses by non-Samaritan listeners - as well as by Holon Samaritans - evinced a lack of awareness, ever so slightly tinged with hypocrisy."<sup>52</sup> Two months later, the newspaper decided to reprint a 1970 article entitled "Before the Time of Delivery," - the recollections of a Holon Samaritan denied permission by the Jordanians to participate in the Passovers of 1966 and 1967. A.B. - The Samaritan News prefaced the article with the admonition:

We want [the under 30 year-olds] to know - because the changes taking

place today as part of the political situation are only a possible preface to a "Return to the Mandelbaum Gate"; and it makes no difference whether the checkpoint will be in its original place or at any point along a border which will separate the two parts of the

Thus, the pessimistic mood of early 1994 and the apparent attitudes of Israelis and Palestinians toward the Samaritan dilemma seemed to call for a greater motivation to organize and act.

The need to start working now, obligates us not to rely on and wait for the fulfillment of all the promises showered on us from every direction. Postponing action until the future, until it becomes clear who holds control, or at least authority, over the area, is liable to work against us. Having a clear objective and knowing our first priority, it is much easier to go into action.<sup>54</sup>

The address for their ethnic concerns most clearly lay with the United States, but rather than resting content with a vague clause in a proposed future agreement, the Samaritans needed to articulate specific demands that would be guaranteed.

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### **Development of the Samaritan Platform**

In the June 17, 1994 issue of A.B. - The Samaritan News, the editors recognized that effective Samaritan involvement in the political spectrum could only be limited to advocating and upholding specific demands. But such demands were indispensable. Cynthia Enloe, writing about ethnic groups seeking autonomy within a polity, stated that the demands of the minority could not be assured if the authorities simply bestowed new benefits based upon goodwill.

What is granted can be withdrawn. If ethnic group autonomy is delegated from above rather than defined and defended from below, it is only as durable as the central regime's view of its political needs.<sup>55</sup>

As will be shown below, the precise definition of Samaritan demands during this period caused their needs to be taken into account while the negotiating process was underway. The first stage in the process that would lead to the definitive "Document of Seven Principles (1995)," the primary expression of modern Samaritan ethnopolitical activity, was an article in A.B. - The Samaritan News that listed three guarantees which, it was hoped, would secure the future existence of the Samaritan people. Namely: a) free passage between Qiryat Luza and Holon, b) a promise not to alter the employment status and economic well-being of the community in both places, and c) the development of Mount Gerizim as a "... large, central, permanent area of settlement exclusively for members of the community."<sup>56</sup> At the end of 1994, the third demand was moderately altered to state their desire to ensure, "... the future existence of the

Representing both halves of the community, A.B. - The Samaritan News co-editor Benyamim Tsedaka took these three demands to Washington, New York and Philadelphia in December 1994 in order to increase the support of the Samaritan cause from American public figures and politicians. The meetings in Washington succeeded in creating a better understanding of the Samaritan situation, as Tsedaka spoke directly with State Department officials and members of Congress, distributing material which expounded upon the three demands. However, upon his return, he reported that

... in Washington ... there is still an embarrassing lack of awareness of the Samaritans' role in the peace process. Some of those involved in the peace process are totally uninformed with respect to the Samaritans, and are even ignorant of their existence.<sup>58</sup>

But, in retrospect, Tsedaka's December 1994 meetings can be viewed as essential since they established the preliminary dialogue between political figures in Washington and members of the Samaritan community itself. They set the stage for further talks in summer 1995 that would be held between a small Samaritan team of negotiators and American political figures. Half of the travel and living expenses for this delegation were funded by A.B. - The Samaritan News, which gave its editors the power to decide its composition.<sup>59</sup> Nine delegation members were chosen on the basis of their common regard as "leaders of the Samaritan Community in its contacts with outside entities." They included a member of the priestly family, the Secretaries of both the communities, a Samaritan teacher from Holon and from Nablus, two members of the prominent Altif family in Nablus, and the editors from A.B. - The Samaritan News, both of whom were Holon residents.<sup>60</sup>

The nine delegates decided to draft a formal document detailing the Samaritan position in order to make it clear to all sides involved in the Peace Process what the Samaritan demands were. They held preliminary talks amongst themselves and agreed upon seven concise but specific demands to be taken up with all political figures, lobby groups, and humanitarian organizations that they would come in contact with. It was also decided to maintain the independence of the Samaritan political activity by eschewing all practical assistance from both Israel and the PNA, while allowing the delegation members to report developments and results of their activities to both sides.<sup>61</sup> The document was signed by the nine delegation members (though not all could actually make the journey) on July 12, 1995, coinciding with their departure for the United States. The full text can be found in the appendix at the end of this work, but it is worthwhile summarizing the main points at present. The document calls for: 1) free and unlimited passage to and from Mount Gerizim and Nablus for all Samaritans in all situations; 2) a special identification document to be given to the Samaritans which will facilitate their free movement; 3) no economic damage to individual

sides to help with community development and that of its holy sites; 6) the participation of the United States in guaranteeing Samaritan requests; and 7) that the Samaritan requests be considered an integral part of the overall peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians and that a follow-up committee with the participation of all parties be set up to ensure the implementation of Samaritan requests.<sup>62</sup>

What is significant in these seven principles is the argument that the Samaritans should be allowed extra-territorial rights, regardless of whether the individual holds the citizenship of the State of Israel or that of a future Palestinian state. It seeks recognition that the Samaritans in Holon and Qiryat Luza constitute one people, exempt from whatever political and territorial divisions that might occur around them. The practical application of this type of "diplomatic immunity" would be the issuance of the special identification document described in the second principle. Should limited hostilities or a full state of war break out between the two political entities, such a document could conceivably give the Samaritans the benefit of being the only people (besides foreign diplomats and U.N. peacekeeping troops) to be permitted free passage between them. In asking for this, the Samaritans are ironically using their greatest weakness to their advantage. Their small size and lack of political power in the larger sphere of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations have generated the realization by both of the contending parties that 600 Samaritans present very little risk to either side in any possible situation. In an interview, Benyamim Tsedaka stated:

In this situation, our small number is an advantage, not a disadvantage - because [for] 600 people?!? [Both sides would say], 'OK, let's give them leave and peace. They have no influence. They have no power to change things. And we can utilize their existence for tourism, for public relations. Why not?' This is the attitude of all sides.<sup>63</sup>

But to further ensure that such a document would be recognized at all times, American backing was essential. To this end, as well as for the purpose of gaining American support for the six other principles, the Samaritan delegation flew to Washington in July, 1995. Through the helpful coordination of Advocates International (a Christian organization dedicated to assuring the human rights of small national groups), the Samaritans met with officials at the United Nations, the U.S. Department of State, the White House, Congress and various lobby groups in Washington. These talks proved to be very beneficial, in that all of the Samaritan concerns were discussed, and that September it was reported that the proposal for the special identification document was, "accepted in principle by the Department of State and is now in various stages of examination and discussion."<sup>64</sup> Following the conclusion of the American meetings, delegation member Benyamim Tsedaka traveled alone to London for a series of talks

that full cooperation had been achieved between the United States and the United Kingdom with regard to the Samaritan issue. This meant that they would jointly support any measure designed to ensure free passage and the continued economic wellbeing of the Samaritans.<sup>60</sup> The addition of another third party which stated its willingness to advocate their cause with both the Israelis and Palestinians was certainly a welcome development, particularly since the British Foreign Office demonstrated its active interest by sending its own delegation to Nablus and Mount Gerizim that autumn in order to examine the Samaritan situation there.<sup>67</sup>

These initial visits by Samaritans to the United States and the United Kingdom, concurrent with talks between them and the Israeli and Palestinian authorities, had succeeded in obtaining the support of all of these governments to ensure the future wellbeing of the Samaritan community. There was no opposition from any of the sides to a future clause in a peace agreement that would secure the Samaritan status quo of the present, and the idea of a special identification document also failed to meet with opposition from both the Israelis and the Palestinians. There was no reason to do so, since it was universally recognized that such guarantees presented an opportunity to perform a humanitarian gesture - not a security risk. However, it should not be taken for granted that these results would have come about on their own, or through a last minute appeal by the Samaritans. Their political mobilization during this crucial negotiating period resulted in their needs being taken into account as decisions were (and are) being made, and not as an afterthought which would require a previously negotiated agreement to be reworked. Had the Samaritans remained passive during this time, thereby precipitating the latter situation, it is probable that they would not have achieved these privileges. It is even likely that the needs of the 600 member ethnic community would have been completely overlooked, and neither the negotiating partners nor the United States and United Kingdom would have been willing to risk what had been achieved for the sake of the Samaritans. The evidence for this clearly lies in the 1948-1967 period when nothing of substance was done by Israel, Jordan or the international community to guarantee Samaritan free travel between the two halves of their people. Having learned a bitter lesson from that period, the Samaritan decision to become politically proactive has changed a previously insecure future into the probability that they will enjoy extra-territorial rights in any given situation.

The Samaritans have not rested upon their political achievements since the diplomatic activity of 1995, but have continued to send representatives to the United States and the United Kingdom to update American and British officials on the ever changing political situation and what effect it is having on the Samaritans. There are no new guarantees



purpose of the continuing diplomatic activity as: ... to keep the contact on a little fire. 'We didn't forget you [so] don't forget

us.' That's the message. You have to keep the contact always - they will forget you. And people always change in every office.<sup>68</sup>

Now that the Samaritans have become a politically mobilized ethnicity, with contacts and sympathetic ears worldwide, it appears likely that they will continue to advocate on their own behalf whenever they feel the need to do so - even after a final peace agreement is reached. They have thus gained a communal voice that has been noticeably absent since ancient times.

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### **New Political Reality on Mount Gerizim**

The signing of the Oslo II agreement in October 1995 set the proposed division of authority in Nablus and Qiryat Luza between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority. A November 15, 1995 issue of A.B. - The Samaritan News reported the precise boundaries of Palestinian, Israeli, and joint control which would be implemented after the IDF redeployment from the Nablus region that December. The summit of Mount Gerizim, having immense strategic value as well as archaeological importance, was kept under full Israeli control (Area C). This allowed the continued deployment of Israeli tanks on the heights overlooking Nablus. Complete Israeli control also extended from the nearby Jewish settlement of Bracha to the Samaritan cemetery on the southern outskirts of Qiryat Luza. However, the Samaritan neighborhood itself, including the Passover sacrificial plaza, was mostly divided between joint Israeli and Palestinian control (Area B) with a small cluster of homes known as the 'Holon quarter' remaining under full Israeli control. Palestinian Authority control (Area A) began at the western edge of Qiryat Luza and continued down the road into Nablus.<sup>69</sup> What all of this meant in practical terms was that the Samaritans coming from Holon would remain under sole Israeli authority until they reached Qiryat Luza, and then remain in a jointly administered area throughout their stay unless they decided to venture into Nablus. Also, while their principle holy places on the summit would be administered only by Israel, the annual Passover sacrifice would be administered by both Israeli and Palestinian police.<sup>70</sup> Thus, there was no question that free passage would continue between Holon and Mount Gerizim during this transitional period before a final Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement would be signed, and no checkpoints or signs marked any of these interim realities. It was simply a

political reality today (1998).

Many Samaritans see the Israeli military control of the Mount Gerizim summit as a situation that will not change, even after a final peace settlement is reached with the Palestinians. This is due to the strategic value of the area, which overlooks Nablus and the Balata refugee camp.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, whenever there are disturbances in the city (such as after the Jerusalem tunnel incident in autumn 1996), the summit is a convenient area for the IDF to station tanks. But the Israeli presence, while welcome to the Holon Samaritans' sense of security during their visits and celebrations at Mount Gerizim, nevertheless presents a challenge to the Qiryat Luza residents, whose efforts to maintain a neutral existence between the Israeli government and their Palestinian neighbors remains unchanged since the Intifada period.

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### **Representation in the PNC -the Second Expression of Samaritan Ethnopolitics**

Just prior to the Israeli redeployment from Nablus, the Electoral Committee for the forthcoming Palestinian Council announced that it had decided to reserve a seat for a Samaritan representative. This step, while highly significant as a confidence-building measure between the Samaritans and the Palestinian Authority, generated a great deal of surprise among both the Israeli and Palestinian public. Both were highly curious as to why the 300 Nablus community members, who had no political power to speak of, would receive such a benefit.<sup>72</sup> The precise reasoning behind this decision still remains unclear due to the various explanations put forth by Palestinian officials and Samaritans themselves. On the one hand, having Samaritan representation on the Council would demonstrate the plurality of Palestinian society and permit Samaritan interests to be represented by one of their own, instead of by an outsider with less of an understanding of their needs. It would show outsiders that religious minorities are not only tolerated in Palestinian-ruled areas, but are even given a voice in the government. Also, the fact that PLO official Nabil Shaath reportedly referred to the Samaritans as the 'Jews of Palestine' when announcing the parliamentary seat reservation evinces the desire of the Palestinian leadership to take away legitimacy from both Israel and Zionism by implying that they do not represent all of Palestine's Jews. The Ummah Press, based in Egypt, speculated further that, "... the fact that this faction alone of all other Jewish groups does not cling to Jerusalem (in fact rejecting this), is the political motive behind the allocation of a special seat for them."<sup>73</sup>

The initial reaction of at least some Nablus Palestinians to the announcement was

decision reflected Yasser Arafat's benevolence towards the Samaritans in particular as well as his awareness of the fact that a Samaritan would better represent his community's interests. The bank manager concluded by conceding that, "Personally, I would prefer to be represented by a Samaritan council member."<sup>74</sup> Some Samaritans, particularly those from Holon, refute the claim that the seat was set aside out of Arafat's good will. The argument has been put forward that American, British and even Israeli pressure played a role in the decision.<sup>75</sup> But most of these Samaritan critics attribute the political concession entirely to Palestinian public relations concerns, and for use as a propaganda tool to convince Israeli settlers and outsiders of the ability of Israeli Jews in the West Bank and Gaza to live freely under Palestinian rule.<sup>76</sup> However, despite the criticism by a few, many Samaritans accepted Arafat's gesture as a compliment, even if they did not believe that their representative would ever hold any substantial power..

Unlike the Samaritan diplomatic activity, whose purposes were universally supported by the community as a whole, the prospect of having a representative on the Palestinian Council aroused some internal dissent among a minority of the community. A.B. - The Samaritan News reported that some individuals regretted the fact that having a representative on the PNC meant that the community was now directly participating in the Palestinian government and thus abandoning their traditional policy of non-intervention in either Israeli or Palestinian politics. By contrast, the diplomatic activity had merely involved advocating their cause to those who had the political power to help them.<sup>77</sup> Many also regretted the effect that the upcoming elections were having within the Nablus community itself. After three Samaritans began to campaign for the seat, the internal tension began to rise due to the rivalry between the candidates and their families.<sup>78</sup> Arafat's original idea was to have the Samaritans decide upon their own representative without any interference or connection with the larger electoral process taking place in Nablus and the other Palestinian ruled areas. The Samaritans instead requested that the Nablus district voters be included in the decision, thereby defining the winner as the Samaritan candidate with the most votes in the district instead of it being a decision reached solely by the Samaritans.<sup>79</sup> Besides lessening the internal tension, this change was also beneficial to the Samaritans since they wanted to send a message to the Palestinian voters that the Samaritan member of the Council would represent Palestinian interests as well.<sup>80</sup> As the January 20, 1996 election results demonstrated, some Palestinians did vote for Samaritan candidates - more so than would have been expected. The winner, Priest Saloum b. High Priest Amram, received 2,430 votes - an inconsequential number considering that the other seven winners from Nablus received between 17,000 and 37,000 votes.<sup>81</sup> But when one takes into account the fact that there were only 160 Samaritans eligible to vote, the final tally looks considerably more impressive.<sup>82</sup> The fact that Priest Saloum won the election is not

suggested that having a priest on the Council serves the interests of President Arafat since Priest Saloum's attire of robes and a red turban add an element of "presentation" to draw attention to the fact that the Samaritans are participating in the PNC.<sup>83</sup> Yet, bearing in mind that for many centuries the priestly house filled the leadership positions of the community, Priest Saloum's election can also be seen as a continuation of tradition.

The practical role played by the Samaritan representative is also subject to different opinions within the community, varying from those who consider the position to be ceremonial only, and those who believe that their representative will have the power to help them a great deal. Even before the elections, it was recognized that a Samaritan Council member would not be involved in the greater political processes, such as the ongoing negotiations with Israel or matters of security.<sup>84</sup> But it was hoped that he would have a voice in issues directly concerning the Samaritans. Given the momentous decisions that may be taken in the near future concerning the final Israeli-Palestinian settlement, the mere presence of a Samaritan representative on the governing body of the Palestinians can certainly be seen as an asset. Many view the election of Priest Saloum as especially fortuitous since, as already mentioned, he and President Arafat are personal friends. This optimism was furthered by statements by Arafat which promised the Nablus Samaritans direct, personal access to him should any problems befall them. Among their Palestinian neighbors, rather than facing resentment at the technically undemocratic way in which they gained representation, the Nablus residents showed greater respect towards the Samaritans because of their new political importance.

PNC representative Priest Saloum himself feels that he is a full member of the Council, citing that he is the only Nablus delegate on the eight member Palestinian Committee for Jerusalem. It is, of course, impossible to miss the irony of this, given the lack of Samaritan religious feeling towards that city. Priest Saloum credits the current repairs to the road connecting Mount Gerizim to Nablus as a result of his advocacy of Samaritan interests in the Council. Palestinians from Nablus also come to him as one of their recognized representatives to ask his support in getting municipality projects approved.<sup>85</sup>

The Samaritan entrance into politics was, despite misgivings from a minority at first, a beneficial development - not only for the goals of the Nablus branch but also towards even better relations with their neighbors. Less than six months after the elections, A.B. - The Samaritan News reported that,

Palestinian Council has been ensured.<sup>86</sup>

The true test of whether a Samaritan representative exists more for Arafat's benefit or for the Samaritans' benefit has not yet occurred, since the final status talks have been largely dormant and thus the PNA has not had to deliberate nor enact legislation dealing with travel to and from Israel. Given the repeated verbal assurances to the Samaritans, Israelis, British and Americans, one can be cautiously optimistic that Samaritan ethnic and political identities under the PNA will not face a dilemma similar to that of the 1948-1967 period.

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### **Conclusion: The Question of Patriotism**

The opening question of this thesis: 'Do the Holon Samaritans consider themselves Israeli and do the Nablus Samaritans consider themselves Palestinian?' would appear at first to be a highly significant question, implying that the Samaritans face a significant division within themselves in the larger Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A maxim recently coined by A.B. - The Samaritan News states that the Samaritan approach to the conflict is to "walk between the raindrops"<sup>87</sup> so as to demonstrate their neutrality to both sides. But speculation as to their loyalties have appeared as recently as April 1997, when a Ha'aretz article questioned Nablus Samaritans over their receipt of Israeli identification cards while they were living under the Palestinian Authority, thus implying that they had a dual loyalty. In that case, the journalists asking the questions were unaware that no declarations of loyalty to Israel were needed, nor that the cards were issued in order to allow them unrestricted access to Holon. The Samaritan reaction to the media reports which suggested that the Nablus community had spurned the Palestinian Authority for Israel was swift. Citing the fact that many Palestinian officials were granted the very same identification, A.B. - The Samaritan News described the episode as a "disgraceful failure of the information policy."<sup>88</sup> Similarly, an internet article which appeared at the time of the Palestinian Elections entitled, "The Samaritans: the Smallest Community in the World that Opposes Israel,"<sup>89</sup> was greeted with scorn by those Samaritans who were shown it. The message is clear: neither side can unilaterally claim the Samaritans as their allies for propaganda purposes. Nevertheless, the question of Samaritan patriotism remains to many outsiders, since many cannot believe that such a bitter struggle as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could have a neutral indigenous party at its center.

Based solely upon the research collected for this work, the short answer to the question of patriotism posed above is: 'Yes, the Holon residents are Israelis.' and 'No,

Samaritans consider both halves to constitute one people regardless of whomever holds the actual power. This is the key to truly understanding their political dilemma, and the Samaritans are trying to convince others of this long-held self realization. This remains their most daunting task. To ensure their future, they must receive recognition by Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the international community that they, as one people, will not be able to survive if divided by a political border.

This work has traced the history of the modern Samaritan experience through the momentous events of the 20th century. It has attempted to explain not only the question of Samaritan identity, but also the reasons behind their recent political mobilization. A group of 600 people does not yield very much influence upon historical events and governments, but the Samaritan community has managed to overcome its near extinction at the beginning of this century to become a politically mobilized community, advocating its interests to the Israeli government, the Palestinian Authority, and even the United States and British governments. Thus far, they appear to have succeeded in persuading all of these parties to take their interests into account when a final peace settlement is reached. In future circumstances (presuming that a two-state solution will be agreed upon), it may be possible to measure the success of a peace agreement and bilateral relations by using the Samaritans as a barometer for the larger situation. The freedom of movement, economic prosperity, and religious tolerance of both the Israeli and the Palestinian societies can be compared by measuring the well-being of the Samaritans living among them. The Samaritans themselves can encourage their positive development by continuing to see themselves as a "bridge to peace" between the two sides.

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## **Appendix:**

### **Seven Guiding Principles<sup>89</sup>**

We, a selected group of leading personalities in the present-day Samaritan Community, leaders of the Community, editors of A.B. - The Samaritan News and directors of A.B. - Institute of Samaritan Studies, hereby set forth the seven principles which guide our efforts to ensure the future of the Samaritan Community in the Middle East in any political reality.

Therefore, in view of the special status of the Samaritan Community:

1. We wish to ensure that, in any political situation and irrespective of any political

from any place where he/she may live, to the centers of Samaritans on Mt. Gerizim and in Nablus, to the Samaritan holy sites on Mt. Gerizim in particular and in Judea and Samaria (otherwise known as "The West Bank of the Jordan River") in general, and from there to any place within or outside the State of Israel.

2. By virtue of the fact that the Samaritan Community is concentrated in population centers under different areas of administration, we request that each member of the Samaritan Community be given an identification document enabling him/her to move freely at all times among the various centers of the Community, irrespective of any political development and in any varying political situation. This document, which shall be issued in the form of a passport, a laissez-passer or any other identifying document shall be officially recognized by all political entities whose jurisdiction and/or control extends over the border checkpoints between the various areas of control.

3. We request that all members of the Samaritan Community be assured by all relevant political entities that, irrespective of any political developments in the area, no member of the Samaritan Community shall be economically disadvantaged as a result of the changes in the various areas of control.

4. We request with regard to all economic, educational and cultural matters, that each member of the Samaritan Community be assured of his/her right to the freedom to practice a profession and to acquire an education or a profession, without limitation and in accordance with his/her qualifications, at any appropriate institution, wherever he/she desires to do so, in any political situation. The assurance of this right shall be recognized by all relevant political entities.

5. We request that all entities involved in the peace agreement between Israel and its neighbors ensure their participation in the allocation of suitable material resources for strengthening the existence of the Samaritan Community and developing its holy sites on Mt. Gerizim.

6. We request that politicians and officials in the United States be aware of these requests and use their good and beneficial influence with all entities involved in the peace agreement between Israel and its neighbors, so that those entities shall honor those requests in any political situation which may develop among them.

7. We insist that the right of free passage, the freedom to practice a profession and to acquire an education, and the need to assist in the development of the Samaritan Community in all areas, constitute an integral part of the peace agreement between



this end, we propose the establishment of a follow-up committee, with the participation of all parties involved in the agreement, which will ensure complete implementation of all items concerned with the Samaritan Community.

Whereto we hereby set out hands, today, July 12, 1995

Priest Elazar (Abd El-Muin) - Mt. Gerizim  
Zebulan(Fayyad) Altif - Mt. Gerizim  
Peleg (Farouk) Altif - Mt. Gerizim  
Batia b. Yefet Tsedaka - Holon  
Miryam (Maryam) Altif - Mt. Gerizim  
Benyamim b. Ratson Tsedaka - Holon  
Yefet b. Ratson Tsedaka - Holon  
Ron (Ronny) Sassoni - Holon  
Ratson (Radwan) Altif - Mt. Gerizim

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