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## A Samaritan Update Interview with Sharon Sullivan



**Sharon Sullivan** moved from Brighton, Michigan to Israel in August of 2009, with her children **Mathieu, Joshua, Aaron** and **Celeste**. They are currently living in Holon with the Israelite Samaritans. They have learned to read and chant Samaritan Torah while participating in all Samaritan holidays and customs. Sharon is currently attending Hebrew University in Jerusalem working on her MA "Bible and Ancient Near East". She worked with Israelite Samaritan Elder,

**Benyamim Tsedaka**, for seven years on the first English publication, *The Israelite Samaritan Version of the Torah: First English Translation Compared with the Masoretic Version*, [Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company (June 15, 2011)] translated by **Benyamim Tsedaka**. Sharon graduated from the **Honors College of Eastern Michigan University** with a BA in History of the Middle East (Religious Studies Minor) in June of 2009.

**Editor:** Sharon, What was your religion or belief before you adopted the Samaritan culture? And when did you first hear about the Samaritans and what made you believe in their Torah?

**Sharon:** I was raised Catholic, and attended Catholic schools for all 12 years of my childhood education, but was raised mostly secular. When I was 19, I simply wanted to know what was true, and this was my first religious experience. Alone, in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, I walked one day asking very simply "God if you are really there, are and can take away the sadness in my heart, I will believe in You for always, no matter if I am alone, for always, and no matter if all buildings no longer exist." This was the beginning of great change in my life in which I felt certain of the existence of the Almighty at that very moment, with a peace in my heart that was instantaneous. At that time I was a young heartbroken girl disappointed from an unrequited crush. I also felt very disappointed in the Catholic Church experience I had as a child, mainly because the ritual and coldness of the Mass was never something I could connect to. After that experience, I went on with life. Curious about what happened to me, I began to try and figure out what was next, who God is, and what to do. I went to many churches through the years, read the Bible in full, searched history to the best of my ability, and with the knowledge I had, tried to live a holy life. For the most part I was naive in many ways. It was very difficult to separate myself from the culture I had been born into. However, when I was in my early 30s and lost a baby boy in pregnancy, I searched harder than ever before to understand. It was at that time that I realized that the majority of religions were

not practicing what was written in their texts, but rather were religious bodies of people professing a faith that others had explained to them, and acting out that faith in the culture to which they were born into. I decided at that time I would live my faith according to, as close to, an original form of religious faith as I could. It was a gradual process of discovery, and eventually led to implementing Torah Laws (as I understood them in my naivety) into my life and the lives of my children. As I tried to understand how to keep the Torah festivals and began researching the Biblical calendar to do so, I first came across the Israelite Samaritans calendar at Benny's Tsedaka's website. I contacted him to ask questions I wanted to know related to who the Samaritans were. He made me aware at that time of ancient Samaritan manuscripts housed at MSU (which was very near to where I lived). I stayed in contact with Tsedaka asking many questions and receiving his gracious answers to all of my questions. The hardest step was about six years ago when I felt certain Jerusalem was a later sacred place than Mount Gerizim. It wasn't a hard step as far as evidence was concerned, because the evidence from the Biblical text is stronger in support of Mount Gerizim, but it was a big step to verbalize it at first knowing full well others would be shocked by that statement, and consider me heretical. At that time it also was not so easy to wrap my brain around the idea that only 750 people in the world (more or less) believed that Gerizim was the sacred place of the Israelites before Jerusalem. It just goes against the odds to agree with such a tiny minority on such a major theological point. However, I knew for sure in my own mind it was correct, and I had already been willing to step away from culture and continue on the path of what was true and factual. Through those years of living in Michigan and working on the translation of the Samaritan Torah into English, I realized that this was as close as I could come to an original form of monotheism. The life of the people in the practice of their faith was very close to the written text. It was a lonely experience for a long time for the kids and I in Michigan. We did not have the support of anyone but each other, and sometimes there was very harsh criticism and mocking of religious purity laws we practiced. When I finished my BA, I wanted to continue and work on the MA. I did not know the Samaritans would be open to the kids and I joining the community, and actually never expected they would. I knew it was a closed community entered only by birth for most, and marriage for a few others. Eventually those doors were opened for us, to our happy surprise. Many adjustments would follow in adapting to the community and culture, and a great relief to be with others and a pride to be among such an ancient religious people would result.

**Editor:** Are you currently becoming an Israel citizen and how difficult is the process in regard to the Samaritan religion?

**Sharon:** I have been working on the process of immigration for over a year now. It is very difficult. Israeli law is partial to those who have Jewish mothers, and to converts under the strictest Orthodox Jewish conversion. At this moment, there are no laws in Israel that would give the Israelite Samaritans the power of conversion acceptable enough to the Ministry of the Interior. Even many Jewish conversions are turned away by the Ministry of the Interior. It is an ongoing process that I cannot afford to fight in the Israeli courts, but perhaps with time a solution will come.

**Editor:** You are currently not married, nor engaged to a Samaritan, how was it possible for you and your children to become part of the Samaritan Community?

**Sharon:** The final decision came from the High Priest of the Israelite Samaritans last year just before Pesach. When the High Priest makes a ruling in the Israelite Samaritan Community it is final. His decision was based upon the laws of the Torah that welcome the Gerim (sojourners of like faith) as members of the Kehilah (congregation) if the males are all circumcised as the major demand of Torah. All of my sons were circumcised, and we had already lived for seven months in the Samaritan neighborhood under the watch of the community in how we lived and practiced the Torah, succeeded to read the Ancient Hebrew Torah text, etc. and so the decision made by the High Priest was also based upon what others said of me and my children. Prior to his decision there was a meeting with the High Priest in which even my parents, my children, and I attended. The children read for him in Ancient Hebrew, we talked about our faith, and my parents confirmed their pride in our decision. The High Priest Aaron has a wisdom in his eyes and a warmth that penetrates to the very soul of a person. I knew from the first moment I met him that he would see the truth of what was in our hearts and he would support us. He is a very holy, holy man.

**Editor:** Has the entire community of the Samaritans supported your commitment and will you be fully accepted by the Samaritan community? Who are your strongest supporters?

**Sharon:** There have been only a few Samaritans who are not so happy with our entering the community. It is not only a big change for my kids and I, but also a big change for a community who has a long history of being closed, mainly due to a hard history of forced conversions and bad experiences with others of different religious backgrounds. I understand that it isn't so easy for all to accept the change of our entrance into the community, and hope with time if they do choose to know who we are, that perhaps trust and friendship will bloom.

**Editor:** Sharon, Have you found any difficulties embracing the Samaritan religion? Are you learning to read and write the Samaritan literature and/or teaching English to the Samaritans?

**Sharon:** There are no difficulties in embracing the Samaritan religion, but a few difficulties in acclimating to the cultural differences apart from the religion. This is a process that is always improving with each new day. It is only natural to have an adjustment to Israeli culture after a lifetime of American culture, and even more so when the culture begins from the start in a tiny ancient Israeli religious community. All of the kids and I are able to read very comfortably in Ancient Hebrew. The kids were much faster than me, and none of my children were held back each month by a time of impurity that prevented them from touching the text or verbalizing the text (as I was). It was an amazing experience, and all of the credit goes to our beloved Torah teacher, **Batya Tsedaka**, who we miss so very much because she died just over one year ago. She was not only a Torah teacher to us, but she "mothered" us in every way, easing our entrance into this community. She was a brilliant and remarkable woman to have known and

studied under. She was the first of the Samaritans to earn a BA degree. She was a light in our community that is still shining in the hearts of so many children and in us for what she lit inside of our souls.

**Editor:** The educational advantages of living with the Samaritan communities are great. After editing the English translation of the Samaritan Torah, are you currently working on other projects?

**Sharon:** I am working on my MA, hoping to finish it a year from now. I am juggling being a single parent to four wonderful children, while commuting over an hour every day to Jerusalem with the two youngest kids. It is my hope to begin the PhD and begin a new project. I have several ideas in mind, but will not pin myself down to what I will work on until I make the next step of meeting with a Professor from Hebrew University to advise me.

**Editor:** What are your future long term plans?

**Sharon:** My long term plans are to finish my studies, continue in the peace activities I am involved in as a Director on the **Samaritan Medal of Peace Committee**, to continue assisting **Benyamim Tsedaka** with research and editing. Benny gave so many years to the kids and I to teach us, and help us to succeed. I have a dream to build an institute of study here inside the community that would house visiting scholars for short-term stays from other universities, and hold all the major works on Samaritanism. At this point it is only a dream, with the hope that someday an enthusiastic donor will realize the treasure the Samaritans hold in being a key to ancient Biblical history.

**Editor:** You can follow Sharon on her living journal at **Little House In The Big World**. <http://littlehouseinthebigworld.weebly.com/journal.html>