

**THE HIGH PRIESTHOOD AND THE ISRAELITE SAMARITAN PRIESTS**  
**By Benyamim Tsedaka, 2012**

In the top of the Israelite Samaritan Community stands today the High Priest Aaron b. Ab-Hisda, 85, the 132nd High Priest since Aaron b. 'Amram Moses brother, that it was promised to his grandson Phinhas the high priesthood to him and his seed forever [Numbers, 24:12].

So, for 112 generations the high priesthood was inherited from father to son in the Phinhas family, heads of the Israelite Samaritan People till 1624 CE. Sometimes the high priesthood inherited by a brother or uncle in the family if there was not a direct successor to the previous High Priest. Sometimes the High Priest appointed his son as his successor and shared with him the duties during his own time of priesthood.

The high priests from the family of Phinhas called "The High Priests the Rabbans", also any member of this family that was not high priest but known as wise and creative held the title Rabban.

A branch of this family was the Phinhas family of priests in Damascus. In two cases in the 12Th century and the 13Th century the high priests of Damascus were called to move to Nablus to head the Israelite Samaritan People, since there was not successor to the High Priest died in Nablus [=Shechem].

Also in Damascus were priests that became High Priests that held this title, the High Priest in Damascus. The Damascus Samaritan Community settled there since the 8Th century CE and also there the high priesthood delivered from father to son. In general the Priests of Damascus and their families lived in a special neighborhood near to the neighborhood where the rest of the Israelite families lived. The high priests of Damascus although they were from the same Phinhas family, they were under the jurisdiction of the High Priest in Nablus the head of all Samaritan People.

The High Priests of Damascus except two, Itamar b. 'Amram and Yusef b. 'Azzi, were not concluded in the lineage of the 112 Samaritan High Priests, the leaders of the Israelites and than the Israelite Samaritan People.

Manuscripts of the Pentateuch scribed by High Priests of the family of Phinhas considered as most valuable and very importuned to be called "Phinhasieh" and in plural: "Phinhasias".

The family of Phinhas high priests continued to struggle for her existence and survival till the beginning of the 17TH century CE. The main reason to this struggle was the decreasing of the family following the decreasing in the number of the Israelite Samaritans.

In 1624 CE the last High Priest of the family of Phinhas, Shalmaiah b. Phinhas b. Eleazar died after serving 11 years in office and he left after him only one daughter. There was mystery in regard to his death. He was in his way from Nablus to the Samaritans of Gaza. He disappeared. There is a tradition that he was taken by the Almighty. But the poet and writer Marchiv n. Jacob solved the mystery in one of his many letters to Europe in the 17Th century when he wrote that "the last Rabban died in our time".

Through all the history of the the Phinhas family of high priests they were escorted by another Aaron's priestly family descendants of Itamar b. Aaron the brother of Eleazar. They were assistants to the high priests of the family of Phinhas in directing the religious life of the Samaritans and in the cult work. They helped the Phinhas High Priest in translating his Hebrew reading of the Pentateuch into Aramaic, the language of the majority of the Israelite People. Because of this special duty they were called 'Abtah = Translator or in Arabic: Haftawi.

The forefather of the current priestly families was the priest 'Abed Ela b. Shalma of the top of the Samaritan Wisdom. He was born and active in Damascus, then moved to Nablus to serve the high priests. He was great poet, translator and teacher of religion. His title in Damascus was "President of the House of 'Abtah".

In 1624 CE the Samaritans was left without High Priest near Mount Gerizim House of El a location very special also to have the better authority of the High Priest in Nablus over the other priests in other cities were the Samaritans dwelt. In 1625, the Samaritan Community of Damascus was destroyed in a pogrom initiated by the governor Mardam Bek. Only one little

family succeeded to escape from Damascus to Nablus. This family are the forefathers of the Dinfi household of today. The current Dinfi household is the largest of the four households of the Samaritans and contain two big families: Altif+Sassoni=Sirrawi.

The sages of the small community of the 17Th century CE have decided to follow priests of the Itamar family. Their deep sorrow about the end of the Phinhas family was combined with the relief that any watt they still have priests descendants of Aaron, a line that ceased from within the Israelite Samaritans.

But the principle of delivering the high priesthood from father to son is limited in the Pentateuch only to the high priests of the family of Phinhas. Very fast the sages woke up to find another principle in the Pentateuch in this regard: "The Eldest priest of his brothers" [Leviticus, 20:20], and they asked the priest Tsedaka b. Tabia b. Yusef to be the first High Priest from the family of Itamar to head the Israelite Samaritans. Since then the principle of delivering the high priesthood "from Father to Son" replaced by the principle of "The Eldest Priest of His Brothers". The Eldest Priest in the family of priests is the High Priest.

In the foundation of the two principles stands the common idea to avoid discontent towards the identity of the High Priest, that it should be limited to the decision of the Almighty and not ever leaving it to human. Thus when the identity of the next High Priest is known following these both principles, there is no chance to split or discontent among the Israelite Samaritans. After the death of the Itamar's High Priest, the next High Priest will be the eldest priest after him.

The current High Priest (HP) is Aaron b. Ab-Hisda b. HP Jacob b. Aaron b. HP Shalma b. HP Tabia b. Yitzhaq b. HP Abraham b. HP Yitzhaq b. HP Tabia b. HP Tsedaka b. Tabia b. Yusef.

Here are the names of all High Priests of the family of Itamar since 1624 CE:

Tsedaka b. Tabia: 1624-1650

Yitzhaq b. Tsedaka: 1650-1694

Abraham b. Yitzhaq: 1694-1732

Levi b. Abraham b. Yitzhaq: 1733-1752

Tabia b. Yitzhaq b. Abraham: 1752-1787

Shalma b. Tabia: 1798-1855 [Shalma was 4 years old when his father Tabia died. He was educated by the Samaritan sages till he became 15 years old and they found that he is qualified to be a High Priest].

'Amram b. Shalma: 1855-1874

Jacob b. Aaron b. Shalma: 1874-1916

Yitzhaq b. 'Amram b. Shalma: 1916-1932

Matzliach b. Phinhas b. Yitzhaq b. Shalma: 1933-1943

His brother Abisha: 1943-1961

'Amram b. Yitzhaq b. 'Amram b. Shalma: 1961-1980

Asher b. Matzliach b. Phinhas: 1980-1982

His brother Phinhas: 1982-1984

Jacob b. 'Azzi b. Jacob b. Aaron: 1984-1987

Yusef b. Ab-Hisda b. Jacob b. Aaron: 1987-1998

Levi b. Abisha b. Phinhas b. Yitzhaq: 1998-2001

Shalom b. 'Amram b. Yitzhaq b. 'Amram: 2001-2004

Eleazar b. Tsedaka b. Yitzhaq b. 'Amram: 2004-2010

Aaron b. Ab-Hisda b. Jacob b. Aaron: February 2010 -

In the last three generations there is a blessed increasing of the number of the members of the Samaritan Community [751 in January 1, 2012] and among them the priestly family of 'Abtah, that now the second largest household after the Dinfi household of the flour households of the Samaritans today. The 'Abtah priestly family is today of three branches called after their forefathers: "House of Phinhas" after Phinhas b. Yitzhaq b. Shalma the priest, the largest branch and the two much smaller branches: "House of Yitzhaq" after HP Yitzhaq b. 'Amram b. Shalma and "House of Jacob" after HP Jacob b. Aaron b. Shalma.

The duties of the 'Abtah's High Priest from Itamar rate: To be the High Court of personal matters in the community with consulting the heads of the households and his brothers the priests; to try to rule peace between singles and families of the community fighting one another;

To calculate the calendar and circulate it among the member of the community 20 years old and on, twice a year, 6 months calculation each time; To direct all religious ceremonies like circumcision, concluding of the reading of the Torah, wedding, divorce and burial as well as initiated personal events as the benediction of the first born or fulfilling and oath; To represent the Samaritan People escorted by the elected committees before the high officials of the governments; To bless the worshippers every Shabbath, festival and the three pilgrimages with the Blessings of the High Priests [Numbers, 6:3-4], and above all events to direct the greatest event of the year: The Paschal Sacrifice on Mount Gerizim [This year in May 4, 2012, Friday at 1PM].

The deputy of the High Priest is the priest Nethanel b. Abraham b. Phinhas b. Yitzhaq, 82.

**Comments on this section from the Editor of theSamaritanUpdate.com**

**This reference is not located in *A Bibliography of the Samaritans, Third Edition, Revised, Expanded, and Annotated*, by Alan David Crown and Reinhard Pummer, ATLA Bibliography, No. 51, The Scarecrow Press, Inc. Lanham, Maryland, Toronto, Oxford. 2005**

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