

WHO WILL HELP THE GOOD SAMARITANS?

By Judith Fein

When I travel, I laugh a lot and I don't usually cry. But all that changed the day Israeli archeologist Ronen Bitan drove me about an hour north of Jerusalem to Mount Gerizim, in the Palestinian Authority, on the West Bank. He led me into the small Samaritan museum, and as I walked around, looking at the exotic clothes, texts and artifacts of a culture I know nothing about, Yefet Kohen, the director of the museum, came up to me. We Samaritans are very ancient people who belong to the house of Israel. There are only 300 Samaritans who live here on Mount Gerizim. Our Bible is the oldest Bible that exists. It is written in the Samaritan language, which is the oldest form of Hebrew, almost like Aramaic. Look, look at the letters. Each one of them corresponds to a body part. The 'ayen' is really an eye, the 'peh' is a mouth. And look over here--this is our genealogy, every generation, every name, going all the way back to Moses. Then he pointed to a small photo gallery on the wall and lovingly indicated the picture of his venerable father. I started to sob. I am only now beginning to understand what moved me to tears.

Most people know nothing about the Samaritans except that in the New Testament, there was a good Samaritan who showed kindness and generosity to the victim of a roadside robbery. The general interpretation is that even though the Samaritans were despised, there was a still a good one among them. So who were these people, and why were they so vilified?

The answer to this question is intertwined with the fact that the Jewish view of the Samaritans and the Samaritan view of the Samaritans is radically different. Most of the Jews I spoke with, including Rabbis and scholars, describe the Samaritans as non-Jews who claim they are Jews, or as people who were once Jews, in the very distant past.

In 722 B.C.E., when the northern part of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians, the military strategy of the victors was to exchange populations. They exiled the northern tribes to diverse regions of the Assyrian Empire, and peopled the north of Israel with others they had conquered from Babylonia, Hamath, Cutha and among the nomadic Arabs. These pagan newcomers merged with those who had remained in Israel, and they became the Samaritans. They adopted Jewish ways, but they are not Jews. They practice loathsome customs like dove worship and ritual sacrifice. They bow down to other gods, they were the enemies of king David, and they are anathema to the Jews.

The Samaritan side of the story is that there was a gradual separation of the northern tribes of Israel from the tribes in the south. After the division, the people from the north were called Samaritans because the name of their region was Samaria. The people from the south were called Jews because their origin was from Judah. After the split, a rivalry ensued between the north and the south.

The main bone of contention seems to be that King David established the Davidic monarchy in the south, in Jerusalem, but to the Samaritans, the holy site is, and always has been, Mount Gerizim in the north. They do not recognize Jerusalem and consider it more of a political entity and a fictional creation than a holy place. They scorn King David because he lusted after Bat Sheva, a married woman. He got her pregnant and tried to deceive her innocent husband into thinking the baby in the womb of Bat Sheva was his. And then, in an act of unparalleled immorality, he had the husband, who was a loyal soldier, killed at war. The holy tabernacle of the

Israelites wasn't at Shiloh, as the Jews tell it, but was at Mount Gerizim. The Jews claim that Abraham took Isaac to be sacrificed on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. The Samaritans say that it wasn't Mount Moriah at all-but was Mount Gerizim. They also claim that they have the oldest version of the Torah in their ancient language and it comes directly from Aaron, the brother of Moses. The Jewish version of the Torah, which was altered by Ezra, is less authentic and has over 6,000 discrepancies from the original text; most of them are deleted references to the holy Har Gerizim. The Samaritans do not recognize those who called themselves prophets: to them, Moses is the only true prophet. They had a strong and powerful kingdom in the north that was conquered by the Assyrians. Some of them were exiled, but the numbers were greatly exaggerated; a good number of them remained in Israel. Those people have kept up their ancient tribal customs until today. They are not Jews, descended from the tribe of Judah, but their lineage goes back to Joseph's sons-Menasseh and Ephraim, who settled in the north of Israel. They consider themselves Samaritan-Israelites. They have suffered horrific persecutions, mass murders, forced conversions, forced idol worship, humiliations and every assault on their faith at the hands of Christians, Muslims and Assyrians. In the 4th and 5th centuries C.E., there were more than a million Samaritans. By the beginning of the 20th century, there were only 146 souls left. Today they cling to their culture and there are about 300 who live on Mt. Gerizim and another 325 in the town of Holon, south of Tel-Aviv.

So who is right? The Samaritans are so small and so unheard that they have little credibility, and yet, that day in the Samaritan museum, something told me that there was truth in their side of the story. I couldn't put my finger on it, but it had to do with piety and persistence and all the proofs they kept proffering. When they allowed me into their synagogue and I saw their Torah and heard their devotion to the Torah and the laws of Moses, I had this feeling that I was encountering the real thing-that despite some modern trappings, these people were maintaining the same traditions today that the tribes of Israel practiced three thousand years ago. I felt in my bones that the Samaritans provided us with an opportunity to experience living history, and that we needed to hear what they were saying. No one I spoke to agreed with me. They adhered to the "official" version of who the Samaritans are.

I interviewed a few of the Samaritans at length. Yefet Kohen, in his museum, showed me a map that he had worked on for twenty years. It indicated where the Israelites had stopped and lived in the desert during their forty years of exile after the exodus from Egypt. He said that for years he had also been trying to figure out how the urim v'tummim worked. How could he know that I was obsessed with the same question? The urim v'tummim were precious stones on an ephod, or apron. They were worn by the high priest and were used for divination by the leaders of the Israelites. It was said that each of the stones had the name of one of the twelve tribes inscribed, and when there was a problem with one of the tribes, the corresponding stone would light up. Yefet Kohen said he thought he knew how this worked. There was a thin gold wire around the stones, and when the priest wore the ephod and consulted the urim v'tummim, the beating of his heart sent out an electrical current along the golden wire. If there was a problem, the priest was so tuned in that the energy would be blocked at one of the stones and by identifying the stone, he would know in which tribe the problem was.

Whew, I thought that was pretty brilliant. But even more: if this man were a fake Israelite, if he were someone masquerading as a Hebrew, why in the world would he care?

The Samaritans do not have rabbis, and their religion is pre-rabbinic in origin. They are presided over by a cohen gadol, or High Priest, in the tradition handed down by Aaron, the brother of Moses. Their religious and political leaders are all Levite priests. I spoke at length with one of the priests, in the synagogue. His name was Itamar Abraham Cohen. He took out the Torah scroll, adorned in gorgeous, shimmering, bright green material, and pointed to the three crowns on top. He explained that these crowns represented the origins of the Samaritans-the tribes of Ephraim, Menasseh and Levi (from Aaron). He showed me the beautiful ancient letters of the Samaritan script, which looked almost like Aramaic to my untrained eye. And then he

showed me how the Samaritans pray: down on their knees, heads to the ground, facing the holy ark and Mount Gerizim. Their synagogue has no adornment and no chairs. There are rugs on the floor. Their hours of prayer are very long, very intense. On Sabbath, the men come to the synagogue and start praying at 3 a.m. During the course of the Sabbath day, they come to the synagogue three times to pray. The Torah is held up during the services, but the study of the weekly Torah portions happens at home, with the family, when the men return from their 3 a.m. prayers, before eating breakfast.

Wow, I thought. That's really amazing. If this man were a fake Hebrew, why was he telling me, in great detail, about the origins of his people from the tribes of Israel? Why was there such devotion and prayer? What did they have to gain from it?

I met Yefet Tsedaka, who lives in Holon and publishes A.B., the bi-weekly Samaritan newspaper, with his brother Benyamim. He told me that the Samaritans only believe in the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses, and not the other sections of the Bible that came later. They do not celebrate the 'newer' holidays--Hanukah and Purim. On Passover, they celebrate the way the Torah commands them to, re-enacting the Exodus from Egypt. Every Samaritan, no matter where he lives, makes a pilgrimage to the holy Mount Gerizim. There, at night, on the sacrificial spot and under the watchful eye of the High Priest, they ritually slaughter unblemished male sheep in their first year. They roast them in ovens and eat them hurriedly, and everything must be eaten by the end of the night. If anything is left, it must be thrown into the fire. Many of the Samaritans, especially the young men, adorn themselves in the white clothes the Israelites wore when they fled from Egypt. They eat matza--or unleavened bread--that is very large, soft, flat and round. They eat the matza and bitter herbs as they consume the lamb. (An Israeli specialist in 'second Temple' Judaism confirmed to me that this is how the Jews conducted sacrifices and ate matza during the period.)

Yefet talked about the harvest festival of the Samaritans. He explained that they were persecuted and attacked by Byzantines when the holiday of Succoth came and they constructed and lived in their tabernacles outside, the way Jews do. So they took them indoors for protection. Now they continue to construct the Succoth or tabernacles indoors, and they celebrate in a very unique fashion. They go into the orchards and spend a fortune on fruits which they hang from the ceiling. Last year, Yefet hung more than half a ton of fruit. Yefet waxed eloquent about the Samaritan marriage ceremony, which lasts for a week. 'And do you know what we are re-enacting during the wedding process? The first marriage in Israelite history. The marriage of Rebekah and Isaac, from the Bible.'

Why was I crying again? In Yefet's words, there was deep truth. And yet, few of the people I spoke to give the Samaritan's words much credence.

I returned to America, and I read everything I could about the Samaritans. I consulted their own newspaper--called A.B.--and the CD-rom I bought at the museum. I read Chaim Potok's History of the Jews again and wrote to Rabbis. I went to Border's bookstore and thumbed through every book I could find on Jewish history. I corresponded with Benyamim Tsedaka by email and read his entry and other entries in the Encyclopedia Judaica. There was so much conflicting evidence. It was clear that Biblical history was written by a Judean writer, from the south. He wrote about Jerusalem and the Davidic line and largely ignored or discounted the northern kingdom and Mount Gerizim. It was also apparent that there was competition and enmity between Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim, and it seems to be both religious and political in nature. But how could I ever get to the truth?

And then, one night, a fellow writer forwarded to me an article from the Jerusalem Post that caused quite a stir in Israel. Briefly, the article (by Abraham Rabinovich) explains that some scholars are challenging the historical truth of key elements of the Bible.....and their proof is in archeological finds. I read the article in a breathless state. The conventional view of the formation of Israel is centered around King David, ascending to the throne of Judah about 3,000

years ago, and uniting the northern tribes into the Judean monarchy. He and his son Solomon ruled for 70 years over a vast empire, and then the kingdom split apart after Solomon's death.

But the potsherds tell a different tale. Israel, in the north, was well-developed, had a palatial government center in Samaria, fortified sites, and large settlements that were signs of a strong and mature economic and political center. If Jerusalem were the seat of such a powerful monarchy, if it were the center of the vast empire that the Bible describes, why did the archeological finds suggest tiny settlements, and a very unimpressive Jerusalem? The potsherds indicate that Judah only emerged as a powerful entity after the fall of the north to the Assyrians. And it seems as though many of the people of the north fled to the south, greatly increasing Jerusalem's population, but many of the northerners also stayed where they were. An Assyrian account of the conquest confirms a population transfer, but the numbers are much less than those stated in the Biblical version.

This coincides remarkably with what the Samaritans are saying. They did not recognize the dominance of Jerusalem. Mount Gerizim was an important religious and political center. The tribes in the north did not all go into exile after the Assyrian conquest. Could the rest of what they claimed be true too?

I went to bed that night, and found it hard to fall asleep. I picked up a recent issue of Archeology Magazine, and perused an article (by Silberman, Finkelstein, Ussishkin and Halpern) about recent finds in Israel at Megiddo, which is supposed to be the earthly location of Armageddon. I sat bolt upright when I read the words: 'New evidence may suggest that the first true Israelite monarchy...emerged not in Jerusalem but in the rich valleys and cities of the north...' The article went on to explain that it was likely that the first real Israeli kingdom arose under northern kings, 'who are pictured as sinful, idol-worshipping villains in the biblical sources. The biblical accounts of the northern kingdom that are contained in 2 Kings were heavily edited and assembled by the priestly and royal scribes of the south probably no earlier than the seventh century B.C. Southern scribes may have given the credit for empire-building to the almost legendary King Solomon as a means of enhancing the reputation and geographical reach of Judah's Davidic dynasty. There is a certain irony in viewing the villains of the traditional biblical story as heroes of a new archeological tale of political and economic development.'

There was no sleep that night. I went back over Samaritan sources and excerpts from the Samaritan chronicles. There was no mistaking it: the truth of the tiny Samaritan community was beginning to gain weight, power and prestige against the mighty history of the Bible. The stones were silent witnesses to what happened in our human past, and now they are starting to speak.

In the northern stones and in the Samaritan stories and lifestyle, there are tantalizing hints of what happened thousands of years ago, when the Davidic monarchy ruled and Judea dominated, taxed and humiliated the tribes of the north. The pain and the resentment persist. Even today, Samaritans do not name their children Moses or David. If a boy is named Moses and someone curses him, he will also be cursing the name of their beloved prophet Moses. As for David, no child should be named after him because he is so reviled for his attitudes and his deeds.

Anyone who reads the Old Testament (II King 17:29) can read the accusations against the Samaritans. They are accused of adoring a god named Ashima. But according to historians, this is a misunderstanding. The Samaritans wanted to avoid using the Tetragrammaton, the holy name of God, so they used the surname 'Shema' and this was misinterpreted as their believing in Ashima. They are reviled for worshipping doves, but there is no evidence that they did so. And, as for accusations of idol worship, they were startlingly faithful to monotheism, even though there may have been decorative carvings and statues (of calves and bulls) in their temples.

The Samaritan story would be devoid of urgency and would, at best, be a fascinating portal into another version of Biblical history, except for one thing. Mount Gerizim is on the West Bank, close to Nablus, which was called Shechem in Biblical days and which is now a hotbed of rage and violence. Many of the Samaritans children go to school in Nablus, and their parents' work is there. Who can guarantee their safety during the current Jewish-Arab violence? When the

political dust settles, when the West Bank is carved up, who will govern the tiny community of Samaritans? Will they fall into the hands of the Israelis or the Palestinians? How will the Israelis treat them? How will they fare under the Palestinians? They are frightened for their future. Under the last Intifada, when they were attacked, Yassir Arafat intervened to offer them protection, and he compensated them for injuries sustained. At the founding of the State of Israel, President Izhak Ben Zvi took a great interest in them, and he helped to establish Holon as a Samaritan community, where they could find work that didn't exist on Mt. Gerizim.

But who will care for the Samaritans now? They have sent missions to America and Europe and are asking anyone who will listen to give them identification cards that ensure their safety, protection and free passage through checkpoints, no matter who governs their sacred mountain and their city. They want to be identified as Israelite-Samaritans and have their future secured. They want political, social, religious and economic guarantees. They want help to develop their infrastructure and to construct synagogues, schools, research and community centers. They want their high priests to be given the same recognition and recompense as rabbis get. They want dignity, freedom, and the right to continue their ancient way of life. Not only do they face the threat of cultural annihilation because of the pulls of western culture on their young, but they face physical, social and economic strangulation when their land becomes the playing field for Middle Eastern politics.

The more I learn about the Samaritans, the more their plight reminds me of the conversos, or crypto-Jews, who have captured the public's imagination. In Spain, during the Inquisition and under the long arm of the Inquisition that followed the conversos wherever they went they suffered forced conversions and persecutions for their Jewish beliefs. At great peril and with astounding courage, they continued to perform their Sephardic traditions. The Samaritan-Israelites suffered the same fate and exhibited the same stubborn adherence to their faith. But because of their past conflicts with the tribe of Jews from the south, they are accorded none of the sympathy and there has been little or no outreach.

We owe it to the Samaritans to recognize their existence and to listen objectively to their history. We need to ensure their survival. Who knows what secrets from the past may yet be revealed to us through their ancient customs, beliefs and practices? The Samaritans plan to tour the USA late this year, talking about their culture and sharing their stirring, unique music. They are reaching out to us, we need to reach out to them.

When I was researching the Samaritans, I received an e-mail from Rabbi Gershon Winkler, who is never afraid to look the truth in its face.

'It is a tragedy to our people that we have dismissed the Samaritans theologically and nationalistically,' Winkler wrote. 'We are not whole, not fully tribal, without them. I mean, look what the rabbinate did to the Ethiopians, who, too, carried our ancient ways for more than two millennia, and then had to reconvert to be part of Israel again. Personally - and you can quote me on this - I suspect the authenticity of the Jewishness of those rabbis who have the audacity and the arrogance to question the Jewish authenticity of Falashas and Samaritans. Samuel the Prophet was right in his hesitation to give in to the request of the people that they have kings like the other countries around them. Consequently, politics got mixed with religion to the point where it replaced spirituality altogether.'

'Samaritans are as non-Jewish as you and I.... Back in those early days, the sages of Judea interacted just fine with those of Sumeria, and the two sectors lived in respect of one another until the politics of Jerusalem set in around the days of Nechemiah and Ezra not long after.'

'In those days ...fundamentalist religious reform was instigated by guys like Ezra. Sort of akin to the religious right today who reign supreme in Israel, and who dismiss everyone else's Jewishness as suspect. The Samaritans have preserved a treasure of richness, pieces of ancient Israel that got lost to most of us "real" Jews who got thrown into Babylonia and eventually Europe. The Samaritans were not without their own silly politics back when, engaging in their own meschugaas in reaction to the rabbinic dismissal of their Jewishness. Nonetheless, a few,

very few of our rabbis respected them as carriers of the old ways. Rabbi Yaakov Emden, for example (18th century), wrote about the importance of learning from them to recover some of our lost ways. He even included in one of his books the Samaritan version of the Hebrew alphabet, which looks nothing like our Hebrew letters today, and which, he claims, is older.'

'So yes, they are about old political stuff around Har Grizim vs. Jerusalem, and their stance is no less correctly founded as is the Jerusalem one.'

My tears began to flow again. Here was a rabbi who was willing to stick his neck out and give credence to the small and struggling community of Samaritans.

No matter what our beliefs about the Samaritans and who they are, a unique and deeply traditional people whose way of life must be supported and maintained. Religious freedom has to be guaranteed to all if we are to consider ourselves evolved humans.