



### The Samaritan Community in Israel 2015-16

The Samaritans (Hebrew *Shomronim*, Arabic *as-Sāmarīyyūn*) claim to be the smallest sect in the world, tracing their roots to the original children of Israel who left Egypt with Moses and entered Canaan with Joshua. They speak what they describe as an ancient form of Hebrew and derive their religious customs from a version of the Torah - the Five Books of Moses. The community observes major biblical holidays such as Succot, Pesach and Shavuot.

Samaritans claim their worship is the true religion of the ancient Israelites prior to the Babylonian Exile, preserved by those who remained in the Land of Israel, as opposed to Judaism, which they assert is a related, but modified variant of the original. Ancestrally, they claim descent from Israelites who have connections to ancient Samaria from the beginning of the Babylonian Exile up to the birth of Christ. The Samaritans, however, derive their name not from this geographical designation, but rather from the Hebrew term, "Keepers [of the Law]". In the Talmud, a central post-exilic religious text of Judaism, their claim of ancestral origin is disputed, and in those texts they are called *Cutheans* (Hebrew: *Kuthim*), allegedly from the ancient city of Cutha (Kutha), geographically located in what is today Iraq.

Although historically they were a large community — numbering approximately one million in the Roman era, they have undergone a sharp decline to as little as seventy thousand in recent centuries. Their unprecedented demographic shrinkage has been a result of various historical events, including most notably the bloody repression of the Third Samaritan Revolt (529 CE) against the Byzantine Christian rulers and the mass conversion to Islam in the Early Muslim period of Palestine.

As of 2015, there are some 800 Samaritans divided between the Mt Gerizim village of Kiryat Luza which is in the Palestinian-controlled area of Samaria and Holon in Israel. There are no Samaritan communities elsewhere in the world.

There are, however, followers of various backgrounds adhering to Samaritan traditions outside of Israel especially in the United States. Today most Samaritans speak Modern Hebrew, especially in Israel. As with their counterpart Muslim, Christian, Druze and other Israeli religious communities, the most recent spoken mother tongue of the Samaritans was Arabic, and is still spoken by the residents on Mt. Gerizim.

#### Samaritan Sources

According to Samaritan tradition, Mount Gerizim was the original Holy Place of the Israelites from the time that Joshua conquered Canaan and the twelve tribes of Israel settled the land. The Samaritans have insisted that they are direct descendants of the Northern Israelite tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, who survived the destruction of the Northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 BC. The inscription of Sargon II records the deportation of a relatively small proportion of the Israelites (27,290, according to the annals), so it is quite possible that a sizable population remained that could identify themselves as Israelites, the term that the Samaritans prefer for themselves. Samaritan historians would add that the basic religious

erected in the desert and established on Mount Gerizim, and built another one under his own rule in the hills of Shiloh. Thus, he established both an illegitimate priesthood and an illegitimate place of worship.

### **Holy Temple on Mount Gerizim**

The precise date of the schism between Samaritans and Jews is unknown, but was certainly complete by the end of the 4th century BC. Archaeological excavations at Mount Gerizim suggest that a Samaritan temple was built there in 330 BC. According to Samaritans, it was on Mount Gerizim that Abraham offered Isaac in human sacrifice. The Torah mentions the place where God shall choose to establish his name (Deut 12:5), and Judaism takes this to refer to Jerusalem. However, the Samaritan text speaks of the place where God *has chosen* to establish his name, and Samaritans identify it as Mount Gerizim, making it the focus of their spiritual values.

### **Samaritans and Modern Times**

The Samaritans are believed to have numbered several hundred thousand, but persecution and assimilation have reduced their numbers drastically. A 1919 illustrated *National Geographic* report on the community stated that their numbers were fewer than 150.

The Samaritans bear Jewish first names as well as Arab ones, and all Samaritans living on Mount Gerizim carry Israeli and Palestinian ID cards, as well as Jordanian travel documents. That well-known fact places them in a potentially precarious position within Palestinian society although the community prides itself on its good relations with all three governments.

The current (2016) high priest is 83-year-old Abdullah Wassef Tawfiq. His younger brother, 73 year old Husney Cohen, is also a priest and the general manager of the Samaritan Museum on Mt. Gerizim. The Samaritan Cohen family traces their lineage back to the Israelite priests, thus the last name Cohen.

One of the biggest problems facing the community today is the issue of continuity. With such a small population, divided into only four families (Cohen, Tsedakah, Danfi and Marhib; a fifth family died out in the last century) and a general refusal to accept converts, there has been a history of genetic disease within the group due to the small gene pool. To counter this, the Samaritan community has recently agreed that men from the community may marry non-Samaritan (primarily, Israeli Jewish and Ukrainian) women, provided that the women agree to follow Samaritan religious practices. There is a six-month trial period prior to officially joining the Samaritan community to see whether this is a commitment that the woman would like to take. This often poses a problem for the women, who are typically less than eager to adopt the strict interpretation of biblical laws, requiring them to live in a separate dwelling during menstruation and after childbirth. Nevertheless, there have been a few instances of intermarriage. In addition, couples undergo genetic testing before being married.

### **Sources:**

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This information is current as of 2016.