

Afterword:

Why the Samaritans?

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When my oldest son was in fourth grade, some time ago, he was studying in a Mishnah class at the start of the academic year. His small class was preparing for the Jewish New Year, and the rabbi—a young graduate of a Baltimore yeshiva—was guiding the boys through Tractate Rosh Hashanah. The group arrived at Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 2:2, the story of the nefarious *Kutim* discussed so beautifully by Joseph L. Angel in our volume. Rabbi Cohen (not his real name) began to explain how these awful *Kusim* (in Yiddish dialect) ruined the communication of vital information from Jerusalem to the Galilee, Syria, and ultimately Babylonia. He told the boys that the *Kutim* were descendants of false converts, always attacking “us.”

Rabbi Cohen must surely have told this story many, many times to many children. After all, Rashi, the great commentator, *al ha-daf*, right there in the Talmud, calls *Kutim* “lion converts”—insincere converts who fell back into idolatry. A little way into the discussion, Elisha looked rattled, and Rabbi Cohen noticed. “What’s wrong Elisha,” the attentive and kind teacher asked. “Rabbi Cohen, my *abba* [dad] has a friend who is Samaritan. Calling Samaritans *Kutim* is like using the “N” word.” The teacher had no answer and went on with the lesson. Soon after, though, he sought me out to tell me this story, and to ask for more information about Samaritans.

A second story: Elisha knows one Samaritan well—Benny Tsedaka (Fig. 24.1). Benny is an occasional visitor in our home, as are we to his. We have been friends for years, having been introduced by our mutual teacher, Professor Dov Noy. Benny was kind and open to my then little boy. On one occasion, Benny was visiting us at the same time that a great Israeli scholar of midrash was visiting the small college, Baltimore Hebrew University, where I launched my

career. I planned a public program, where we all would learn and teach about Samaritans and Jews in antiquity. The three of us, and the rest of my family, had a delightful dinner at our home before the program (which was well attended). As the meal was winding down, Leah, my wife, brought out small booklets of the blessings after meals to conclude the event.

Tsedaka was deeply engaged in conversation with Elisha, and the scholar, a dear man, and I were jabbering along separately—in Hebrew. He looked at me wryly as the booklets arrived with a twinkle in his eye and asked me: *Mevarkhin alav?* That is, is he included in the call to say grace said at the beginning these blessings, traditionally pronounced when in the presence of three Jewish men. I smiled, knowing that my friend was citing a Mishnaic text in Tractate Berakhot (Chapter 7). It reads: “Three who dined together must say the call [to bless]?” The Mishnah goes on to mention the *Kuti* as one to include. I glanced in his eye, chuckled, and responded in English: “Leave me alone.”

This second story, of two Jewish academics and a Samaritan, is more complex than it seems at first glance. Jews have not included Samaritans in the prayer call for a millennium and a half, as attitudes and relations between Samaritans and Jews hardened into enmity, name-calling, and separation. Friendship became rare if it happened at all. Our story is still more complicated, however. It should be recalled that Benny’s mother was Batya Tsedaka, the daughter of Yefet Tsedaka—who was the first Samaritan to marry a Jewish woman. Her name was Miriam, a penniless widow introduced by Yefet’s friend Izhak Ben-Zvi. According to the rabbinic matrilineal principle of Jewish descent, then, Benny is indeed Jewish. Our program was a success. More than that, at this meal Elisha once again saw, in the flesh, that his father has a friend “who is a Samaritan.”

The negativity between Jews and Samaritans began to change in recent times, after the Jerusalem Chief Rabbi—*Hakham Bashi*—Hayyim Abraham (Mircado) Gagin (d. 1848) saved the Samaritan remnant from destruction by asserting their Israelite lineage; the legendary high priest Jacob son of Aaron came into office; and then after Yefet Tsedaka took in a young Izhak Ben-Zvi in Jaffa in 1909. Ben-Zvi, who appears across this volume, was a friend, matchmaker, scholar, and the main benefactor of the Samaritans for over half a century. This connection had inestimable significance for the Samaritans. Having a leader of the Zionist movement as their patron had great benefits—and the president of the new state even more so. Ben-Zvi's last public act was the dedication of the synagogue in Holon in 1963. As Israel Tsedaka has taught us, the Israeli Samaritans declared the feud over, furthering their sometimes complex integration into Israeli society. As far as the Israeli Samaritans were concerned, the Samaritans and the Jews were one nation once again.

Samaritans and Jews have come a long way together—from their biblical split through the reigns of the Persians, Greeks, Romans, Christians, and Muslims. This was a relationship that both sides saw as a kind of death dance—until Jacob son of Aaron, Yefet son of Abraham, and a wide range of Jewish and Samaritan figures decided otherwise. Reconciliation is not easy in our world—whether between Serbs and Croats, Protestants and Catholics, Trumpists and Progressives, or Samaritans and Jews. It is rare, and notable, especially for a thirty-six-hundred-year-old enmity. In a real sense, then, this complex attempt at reconciliation is a model for us all.

The Samaritans are neither Jews nor Arabs: in fact, they are both and neither all at once. Thus, they pose a challenge to our sense of self. They are the “other Israel.” For some of my students, this realization is close to the equivalent of hearing that humans are likely not alone in

the universe. Meeting Benny on campus—three times so far—has been a point of real and unforgettable excitement for students and faculty alike. Our project is an opportunity on the largest possible stage for us all to reflect—Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Samaritans—to think about otherness and complexity, about core issues of who each of us is, and about what we hope to be.

A third story: a few years ago, an Israeli friend, an art historian, received a phone call from her granddaughter, a soldier in the legal department of the Israel Defense Forces. “*Savta*,” she asked, what is the difference between a Samaritan and a Karaite?” “Why do you ask,” inquired the grandmother. “*Savta*, a Karaite soldier insulted a Samaritan soldier, and he beat him up. The case came to us, and we need to understand the difference between them.”

Sometimes invisible to Israeli society, the Samaritans are a piece of modern Israel, of its “fabric,” its cultural “mosaic.” The Holon branch is completely integrated into Israeli society, while the Mount Gerizim community has a far more complex place in the web of relationships between Israel and the Palestinians. Some Mount Gerizim Samaritans work in family businesses, and earn their livings writing amulets for Arabs and Jews in Nablus, while still others work in factories in the Israeli city of Ariel. One works for a rent-a-car firm at Ben-Gurion Airport. Another is a school principal in Nablus. Samaritan tahini is world-famous, manufactured by the sons of the high priest on Mount Gerizim, featured in the Hebrew version of *Forbes* magazine, and is produced under rabbinical supervision (for our benefit. Fig. 24.2). Yefet Tsedaka (named for his grandfather), Benny’s brother and neighbor in Holon, is a member of the Central Committee of the Likud, the political party led by former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. A Samaritan seat is reserved on the Palestinian Legislative Council. The community, like all communities, also has its limits—played out publicly in the painful excision of popular Israeli

actress Sofi Sarah Tsedeka, who converted to Judaism after an acrimonious separation from the community and who is now embracing something of her Samaritan roots. In a real sense, Samaritans are one of the many “tribes” of modern Israel, a piece of its complexity, a lesser-known and understudied element of a complex multicultural country.

For me as a cultural historian of Judaism in the Roman world, Samaritanism has great academic interest. For more than a century and a half, Samaritans have been studied and analyzed, their history discussed, artifacts uncovered, and texts published. Archeologist Leah di Segni nonetheless wrote in 1998 that the Samaritans are a “ghost people.”¹ What she meant is that like ghosts they float through scholarship on ancient Judaism and Christianity, and are deployed as “explanations” for otherwise inexplicable questions, a side-subject that Jews and Christians use when convenient but one that they seldom actually know. There is much historical scholarship on rabbinic or Christian attitudes toward Samaritans, but it is the rare scholar of these fields who goes beyond that. There have been some, as we have seen. Michael Avi-Yonah included Samaritans in his story, as did midrashist Joseph Heinemann, Noy the folklorist, and more recently Menachem Mor and Hagith Sivan in their larger histories.² In general, though, actual Samaritans, their literature and material culture have been left to a small cadre of deeply dedicated Samaritanologists. The spotlight in scholarship instead has been on “non-rabbinic Jews,” “Jewish followers of Jesus,” Jewish–Christian relations in late antiquity, and Christian influence on Judaism.

The integration of Samaritan Studies into contemporary scholarship on the history and literature of late antiquity provides a third voice, the Samaritan, alongside the Jewish and that of Roman Imperial Christianity. The two “Israels” of the flesh are now together with the newer

¹ Di Segni, 1998, 51.

² Avi-Yonah, 1984; Mor, 2003; Sivan, 2009.

“Israel of the spirit.” Samaritanism allows historians like me to ask hard questions about Jewish and rabbinic identity and their “others” and get answers back from a second living community. We can now go beyond the modern construction of “non-rabbinic Jews”—people whom ancient rabbis called *ammei ha-arets*—“people of the land”—who were “ignoramuses,” be they rich or poor, educated or not. I realized at some point that I could engage not only texts and artifacts (if that is not enough) but actual “non-rabbinic” Israelites—Sabbath-keeping, Torah-observing Israelites— many of them Levites, like me—and that they were willing to talk. When I first began this search, almost three decades ago, American scholars were wont to smirk (“there he goes again”) when I suggested that Samaritan Studies and the integration of the “other Israel” into our work could transform and revive a field, just as they did when my dear departed friend Yaakov Elman began to explore the Babylonian Talmud within its Sasanian Persian environment.

As I was quietly collecting Samaritan *mezuzot*, books and ephemera, Yaakov was acquiring Zoroastrian documents and prayer garments. We were both making new friends and enamored with the parallel paths we were walking. The comparativist impulse has always been a trademark of Yeshiva University scholarship—from founder Bernard Revel’s work on Karaite *halakha* (which included Samaritan law), second president Samuel Belkin’s work on Philo of Alexandria, to Louis H. Feldman’s studies of Josephus, Elman’s work on the Talmud in its Iranian context, and my own interests in art, archeology, and now the Samaritans. Yeshiva scholars have always been contrarian in this way, bucking the majoritarian discourse in favor of comparative studies. This is a hallmark of our commitment to both *Torah* and *Madda*, to an integrationist impulse that looks out from and builds upon our core commitments to Judaism, the Jewish people, Zionism, and synthetic engagement with our neighbors.

More than a century ago, the great Zionist cultural sage Asher Ginzberg, known as Ahad Ha'am, "One of the People," called on his colleagues to overcome their prejudices and help the then-faltering Samaritans to survive. Enough Jews responded with funds and food and support and even teachers. After May 1948 and until June 1967, the early State of Israel—struggling itself— quietly supported the community in Nablus and helped the Israeli Samaritans to establish themselves in Holon. This support continues, though many in the Israeli religious establishment have always been understandably queasy about the relationship. Today prosperous beyond their dreams, the Samaritan community has reached out to us. In preparing our documentary, exhibition, and books, the community allowed us—meaning Moshe Alafi—to enter places where few have gone before. They have embraced us, supported us, and shared their deepest fears and hopes with us in a very public way. In a real sense, we have become a mirror for the community, as the Samaritans plot and imagine their own future—and they for us, as we plot ours. "Do we include him?" The answer of our project is an emphatic "yes!"

