

The Celebration of Passover by the Samaritans

By Ya'aqov Ben Uzzi Ha-Cohen, The Samaritan

In Nablus.

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Recent interest in the Samaritan Israelites those who wish to know the truth of their customs and beliefs, and particularly of the ceremony of offering the Paschal sacrifice on their holy mountain, has led me to write this chapter of their history. The present study, however, will be limited to the Samaritan description of the Paschal feast alone. I hope my readers will forgive this limitation. With the aid of the Lord Almighty (praised be he!), I shall write a more comprehensive study of the Samaritan history and customs in the near future.

The Editor

Who are the Samaritans?

The Samaritans are the remnant of the three great tribes of Israel, the children of Jacob, peace be unto him. At present they number no more than 206 souls (men, women and children). The "Cohanim" (priests), who are related by direct descent to Levy the son of Jacob, peace be unto him. They number forty-five in all. The eldest is regarded as the head of the Cohanim, and is called the Haccohen Hagadol (High Priest), and is leader of the people of the Samaritan lay community, who are descendants of the tribes of Ephraim and Menasheh. They are called Samaritans, or "Shomrim" in Hebrew (literally, those who guard) because, their small number and their poverty notwithstanding, they continue

1[1] There is no date found in this little booklet that has also the Hebrew parallel writings. Benny Tsedakab gave the following information. Thank you Benny! Yaacob be Essi as he is also known was born in Nablus in 1899. He was a journalist from the 1902' to 1940's for the Davar, Ha'aretz, Doar Hayom, Haboker, Hegeh Hebrew newspapers and the English Palestine Post. In his later years he wrote for the A.B.-The Samaritan News. In his past time he hand-copied hundreds of Samaritan Books. Yaacob had a wide knowledge of Arabic and the Islamic culture. He spoke fluently modern and ancient Hebrew, Arabic and English. He served as High Priest from 1984 till he died in 1987.

to observe their ancient religious creed, the religion of Israel. That is the true explanation of the name “Shomrim,” and the historians err if they give any other explanation.

The Offering of the Sacrifice.

On the 10th of “the First Month,” all Samaritans go to the summit of Mount Gerizim, where they put up wooden huts and tents to store all their provisions, for the remain on the mountain for ever 10 days. After having made these arrangements, the preparations for the ‘offering of the sacrifice’ commence. A few experienced Samaritans are delegated to buy and prepare everything necessary for the ceremony. They purchase seven sheep, one for each clan; for the Samaritan community is composed of seven principal families. They buy also fuel and wooden poles, which are made ready for the ceremony by the Samaritan carpenters.

These preparations are started on the tenth of the month in compliance with the word of God, “...In the tenth day of this month they shall take to them every man a lamb, according to the house of their fathers, a lamb for an house” (Exodus, 12:3).

The sheep must be healthy, not lean or lank, of a year in age and of the best, as God said, “Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year: ye shall take it out from the sheep, or from the goats” (Exodus, 12:5).

These animals are given the utmost care. They are led daily to a spring where they are thoroughly cleansed.

On the last day prior to the ceremony, the 14th of Nissan, the Samaritans rise early to obtain and store enough water for the coming sacrifice. Samaritan youths wear special attire for this task. Their clothing is entirely of white: a white gown, white trousers, and a white girdle. Thus clad, they proceed to the well from which they draw water and carry it to the spot fixed for the offering of the Paschal sacrifice. There they pour the water into large pots, which are placed upon the altar.

The altar is in a long ditch, not too deep, built of plain, un-masoned stone. Two hours before the sacrifice a fire is kindled beneath the pots. This done, the youths go to another ditch near by, which is round and of three meters depth, and which they call, “Tannur” (oven). Within this “tannur” they place wood and straw and light it. The altar is made long enough to furnish sufficient space for the slaughtering of the offerings and to boil the water.

The “tannur,” however, is made deep, as it is used for roasting of the offerings. For God forbade them to be cooked or eaten raw. “Eat not of it raw, nor sodden at all with water but roast it with fire,” (Exodus, 12:9).

When the feast happens to fall on the Sabbath eve, the Samaritans commence these preparations at 3 o'clock (Arab time), i.e. 10 a.m., so that the sacrifice may take place exactly at noon, two hours later. In all other cases, the preparations begin two hours before sunset, i.e. 10 o'clock (Arab time), or 3 p.m., so that the sacrifice may be offered at the setting of the sun.

Half an hour before the ceremony takes place, the whole Samaritan community gathers at the designated site, where they stand solemnly in two groups: one group consisting of the religious heads, the "Cohanim", elders and notables, clad in white gowns, white headgear, white girdles, and carrying sticks. The second group is of those youths who, attired in white (as described above), have borne the water to the altar. They stand over the altar with upturned sleeves.

The "Imam" (the priest conducting the prayers) opens the ceremony with a religious chant to which each of the groups in turn has been handed down from ancient times. The chant completed, the High Priest mounts a large stone and recites, in a loud voice, the verses of the Torah concerning this sacrifice until he reaches the verse, ...and the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it in the evening"(Exodus 12:6).

And then the sheep are rapidly stretched out upon the altar and slaughtered. At this moment the entire gathering proclaims the praises and the exaltation of the Lord. They clap their hands and chant, recalling how God smothered the firstborn of the Egyptians. They then take some of the blood of the sacrifices and smear it on the lintels of their dwellings and the brows of their children, in compliance with the word of God, "And ye shall take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood that is in the basin and strike the lintel and two side posts" (Exodus, 12:22).

After this they draw hot water from the pots upon the altar and pour it on the skins of the slaughtered animals. They then start plucking the wool from the animals, hides until they are convinced of the cleanliness of the skin. Two of the Samaritans take a long pole, in the center of which is a large hook, on which they hang the offering. Thus loaded, they place the pole on their shoulders, with the sheep hanging between them.

The butcher then cuts open the carcasses and removes the intestines and internal organs. These organs are cleaned on fresh water, salted and then thrown into the fire. The inspection of the carcasses and their dissection begins, and care is taken that none of the bones are broken, as God decreed that none of the bones should be broken.

The sheep are then placed on sharp-edged wooden poles which pierce them lengthwise. They are salted and then carried by the youths to the "Tannur" (oven), which is by now red-hot, and are thrown in.

The "Tannur" is covered with a wooden lattice-work, over which green grass is strewn. The oven is entirely plastered and covered with red earth, so that it becomes air-and smoke-proof, to prevent the meat from being burned.

The animals remain in the oven for about three hours, until close upon midnight. At that time the Samaritans proceed to the oven, planning the consumption of the broiled meat at exactly the same time when the first-born of the Egyptians were destroyed, as it has been said, “And it came to pass that at midnight the Lord smote all the first-born in the Land of Egypt” (Exodus 12:29).

The heads of all the families come to the oven, each carrying a tray made of straw, with the High Priest at their head. The plaster is broken, the wooden cover carefully removed, and the animals taken out and carried to the designated place of prayer where all the communit-men, women, and children- are gathered.

Now they chant hymns loudly and joyously “Marror (bitter herbs) and Matzoth (unleavened bread) are spread over the meat, as the Lord commanded, “...And unleavened bread, and with bitter herbs they shall eat it.”

They then attach the meat, tearing it apart with their hands and starting to eat hastily, just as the children of Israel ate their food on leaving Egypt: “...And ye shall eat it in haste: it is the Lord’s Passover’ (Exodus, 12:11).

In case, however, the feast falls upon a Sabbath eventide (as it did this year), the remains are gathered and put away in a safe place until the Sabbath is over, and then burned, and it is said in the same verse, “...and that which remainth it until the morning ye shall burn with fire” (Exodus 12:10).

On the mourning of Passover, prayers are held and last about four hours. The Samaritans then greet each other, praising the Lord who enabled them to fulfill their holy rites.

They spend the following seven days on the mount, eating only Matzoth (unleavened bread). No sign of leaven is to be found. At the end of the feast, the Samaritans, full of joy and happiness, make pilgrimage to that spot on the peak of Mount Gerizim where the “Shekina” (Devine Spirit) resides.

Written by YAA’QOV the son of

UZZI the COHEN.

The Samaritan Passover ceremony this year will coincide with Friday, April 27th.
