



The Seat of the High Priest

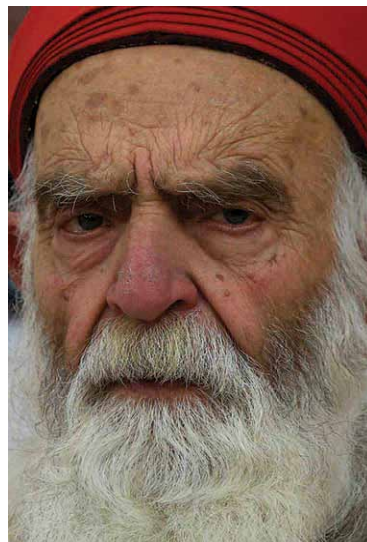
Samaritan Celebrations of Sukkot



By Jamil Dababat

This year I was late in ascending the Holy Mount to congratulate my Samaritan friends. The feast fell on October 16, while I was out of the country. For the past seven years I have kept an eye on the particulars of the *Sukkot* feast. The Samaritans, the smallest religious community in the world, celebrate this feast like all Jews, by building *sukkah* (small huts) in which the faithful live for the duration of one week. Samaritan *sukkahs* differ from the rabbinic *sukkahs* both in symbolism and form. Rabbinic tradition celebrates the travel of the Israelites through the desert whereas Samaritans commemorate the dwelling of mankind in the Garden of Eden, and thus cover their *sukkah* with delicious fruits.

When one talks about the religious fabric of Nablus, a city originally built by the Canaanites, the *Samaritans* must be mentioned. Nablus is one of the oldest cities in the West Bank. It is located between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, both of which are mentioned in the Old Testament and in the writings of Muslim travelers and of Orientalists. The Samaritan community, who used to live inside Nablus, is an ethno-religious group that originated among the Israelites. Today most of the community lives on top of Mount Gerizim. The name Samaritans



The previous Samaritan high priest. Photo courtesy of Abdallah Wasef.

means watchers or keepers of the law, as set down in the Torah. There remain only a few hundred Samaritans today, and they consider themselves the descendants of the Sabbateans, the tribes of Levi and Joseph, and their priests as descendants of the tribe of Levi. The high priest is usually the oldest man in the Cohen family. Each male member of the Cohen family initially practices a profession and after retirement devotes his life to the study of religion and the composition of

"I wonder whether this city truly is the garden of peace that Samaritans talk about all the time. Whenever I sit next to the Samaritan high priest, I hear his supplications to God for a long life so that he may one day see peace realized."

religious texts. On holy occasions such as prayers, feasts, and on Saturdays, Samaritan men wear the traditional Arab outfit that consists of the *qumbaz* (male robe) and the *tarboosh* (fez). The Samaritans who live in Nablus hold Palestinian-Israeli IDs and speak fluent Arabic and Hebrew. Since the first Intifada, they have moved to live on top of Mount Gerizim that rises 881 meters above sea level. From here, viewers can enjoy the panoramic scene of the city of Nablus and look over the rolling hills all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. It is the holiest spot for Samaritans, as they consider it the true location of the holy temple. There is only one other remaining Samaritan community that at the beginning of the twentieth century moved to Holon near Tel Aviv; its members hold only Israeli IDs.

Gathering to celebrate the feast of Sukkot, Samaritan priests wear a turban bound in white and the other men wear the tarboosh (also known as fez, head covering) on feast days. Photo courtesy of Ayman Noubani.





A Samaritan sukkah (tabernacle) is constructed with fruits and vegetables that are made into juice on the last day of the Sukkot feast. Photo courtesy of Ayman Noubani.

I have been to Nablus and Mount Gerizim dozens of times and for the past three years have been interviewing Samaritans to write my anthropological thesis on this small community. But every time I arrive in Nablus and see this mix of people that has its origins in Israeli, Palestinian, and other communities from various parts of the world, I say to myself: "This community of people with Jewish roots, living peacefully among Palestinians, is indeed a strange picture, different from what is taking place around us."

Some years ago, I sat down for the first time next to Abdallah Wassef, or, as he is called in Hebrew, Ovadia Cohen or *Hagadol* (revered rabbi). He was not a high priest then, but ranked second in the list of senior priests who take on the religious affairs of the *Samaritans*. I asked him about the meaning of the name Samaritans, and he answered, sitting and leaning on his

cane, "We are the descendants of the ancient Israelites, and we have not left this land. Like Jews, the Samaritans belong to the people of Israel, but they have somehow adapted to the Arab-Islamic culture, especially in Nablus. In contrast, Samaritans living in Holon have integrated into the Israeli community. Samaritans believe that their Torah is the *right* book and that their religion is the true religion of Israel."

During the last *Sukkot* feast, Samaritan military officers, whose insignias on their shoulders indicate that they hold senior military ranks, arrived on Mount Gerizim in military jeeps and paid their respects to the high priest. A group of Israeli soldiers arrived, carrying machine guns on their shoulders. In the same chamber where he receives journalists and visitors on ordinary days, the high priest is seated underneath the tabernacle in the middle

of the room to receive well-wishers. His chair in the center of the room is not an ordinary seat. Samaritans see themselves as bridges of peace among all peoples. Most people in the world do not know that the official calendar of the Palestinian government includes eight feasts of the Torah during which Samaritans are given official leave from work. During these feasts, the high priest receives well-wishers from the followers of the three monotheistic religions. They come, sit together, talk, and take pictures. They eat *baklava* (an Arabic sweet made of layers of thin dough and filled with nuts) or chocolates and drink juice or tea. For seven days, visitors from all over the country assemble here.

Not only do Israeli military officers and civilian officials pay their respects and admire the sumptuous seat of the high priest, but Palestinians also come to congratulate him as well. Ministers,

Followers of the three monotheistic religions gather under the tabernacle set up during *Sukkot*. Visitors praise each tabernacle and express their admiration for the large, luscious pomegranates and oranges that decorate the tabernacles in remembrance of the Garden of Eden.

officials from nearby institutions, bank managers, merchants, and individuals flock to greet the high priest and wish the Samaritans well. This year, thousands of people went to see the tabernacle. On the afternoon of the last day of *Sukkot*, the short road that leads to the Samaritan quarter on top of Mount Gerizim was crowded with tourists, Israeli military personnel, and Palestinian and Israeli civilian vehicles. It was a peculiar mixture of vehicle plates that can be seen only on the top of Mount Gerizim, and the Samaritans were tremendously joyful to see this number of well-wishers and celebrants.

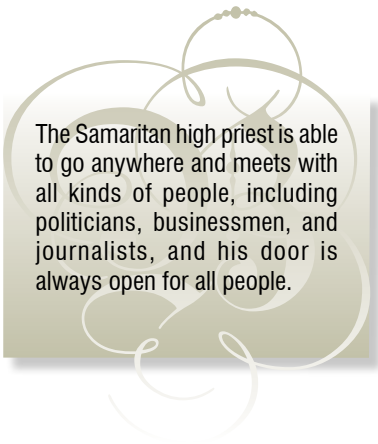
Before I headed to the house of the high priest, I went to visit his brother Husni who is the curator of the Samaritan Museum. Hundreds of people visit the museum each day, and on this day he was guiding around twenty visitors of various nationalities. Some of them were wearing a *kippah* and their wives had their heads covered with hats or scarves, the typical dress of Orthodox Jews. Others were Christians who had climbed up the mountain to gaze at the seat of the high priest. Mount Gerizim becomes more hectic in the evening with the arrival of Palestinians from Nablus who have social ties and relations with Samaritans. Families arrive with their children who are fascinated by the fruits dangling from the ceiling of the tabernacle. According to tradition, on *Sukkot* each Samaritan home has a tabernacle set

up in the sitting room of the house. The high priest explains, "Setting up a tabernacle in homes symbolizes the end of the period of dispersion that began thousands of years ago."

Samaritans do not celebrate national holidays, but they demonstrate true commitment to the details of daily religious life during holy feasts, an act that has historical significance. The doors to Mount Gerizim are open to all people who wish to sit under the Samaritan tabernacle. Likewise, Samaritans in Holon have extended an open invitation to people to visit their Samaritan sanctuary. Miryam Tsadaqa and her husband Benyamin Tsadaqa, a well-known Samaritan historian, sent out an invitation on Facebook to friends and people everywhere.

When Samaritans moved to Holon about a century ago, they were looking for work and food. In Holon, where the standard of living is among the highest in Israel, they found better job opportunities. During the past two decades, trade activities between Palestinians and Israel have witnessed considerable growth, and the Samaritans were a bridge between both communities. They move between two different worlds and are in harmony with each one. They go to the *souk* (market) in Nablus to buy their vegetables and fruit and head to the beaches in Eilat or Tel Aviv for vacation.

The eighth day of *Sukkot* marks the holy feast of *Shemini Atzeret*, which literally means the assembly of the eighth (day). It is the feast of the Joy of the Torah. On this day, families pick fruits off the tabernacle and from trees in orchards and squeeze them to make juice that will be preserved for the entire year. Juice is also offered to guests during visits. Outside, Samaritans have started to burn branches from palm and laurel trees. Children sing songs. The tabernacle feast has come to an end, but this end marks the beginning of the new season, winter is coming. Husni remarks with satisfaction, "At this



The Samaritan high priest is able to go anywhere and meets with all kinds of people, including politicians, businessmen, and journalists, and his door is always open for all people.

time I remember the popular proverb in Nablus that says, 'Destroy the tabernacle and spread the carpets.'" Life renews itself, and Samaritans go back to their daily chores, moving freely between the areas on both sides of the Wall.

The Samaritan high priest receives and welcomes Jewish, Muslim, and Christian visitors during feast days. But also, accompanied by one of the Samaritan priests called Khader, and other members of his community, the high priest can be seen taking part in the annual Christmas procession in Nablus.

Three days after *Sukkot*, as I was walking toward the abandoned Samaritan synagogue in the old city of Nablus, I met three Samaritan priests, two from the tribe of Levi and one from the tribe of Joseph, who were looking for fresh vegetables. They reproached me because I had not visited them during the feast. Samaritans are as proud of being visited as they are of their tabernacles.

Jamil Dababat, a Palestinian journalist and writer, lives in Tubas in the northern West Bank, and has worked with the Palestinian News Agency (WAFA) for the past 15 years. He has covered stories in Palestine, North America, Africa, and Europe regarding Palestinian and international affairs. Jamil has won several national and international awards, and specializes in covering political, environmental, minority, and religious affairs.