

ALMOST like Pesach



The Shomronim have been practicing their Pascal sacrifice for the last 2,500

years, and watching the annual event makes you think you're in a time bubble. The ancient chanting and ritual of this throwback sect makes us wonder: Is this what our forefathers' Passover looked like when the Temple stood in Jerusalem? And is this what the future will look like when the Temple is rebuilt?

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY **Ari Z. Zivotofsky**
 and **Ari Greenspan**



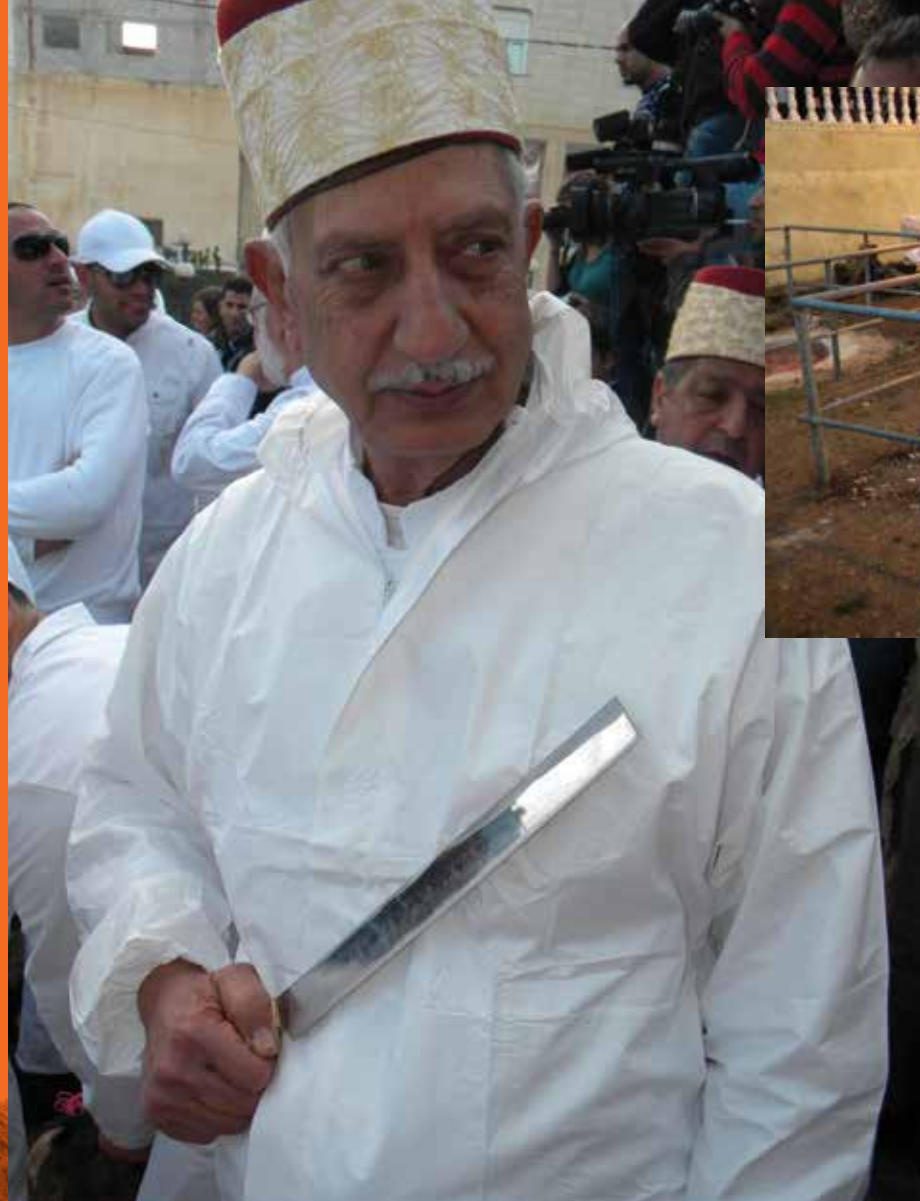
We could have been in a time warp. Had we somehow landed in fifth-century BCE Samaria? The setting was the Samaritan village of Kiryat Luza, which sits atop Har Grizim in the Shomron, right next to the Israeli town of Har Brachah in the environs of Shechem. The event was the community's annual "Korban Pesach," and there is indeed nowhere else where one can still see animal sacrifices in Israel by a group that claims it's doing it exactly the way the Torah prescribes.

The Samaritans, or Shomronim, have a solar-lunar calendar similar to our Jewish calendar, and indeed offer their annual Pascal sacrifice on the 14th of Nisan. But because they do not accept all of our calendrical rules, their Rosh Chodesh may be off by a few days each month, and they also incorporate leap years differently than does the Jewish calendar. Every six months their high priest announces the calendar for the upcoming half year, and thus, their Pesach can fall around our Purim, Pesach, or Pesach Sheni. This year their Pesach fell approximately a month after ours, on the day before our Pesach Sheni. Next year it will be a day before our Pesach.

The Shomronim have been observing this ritual for at least 2,500 years on Mount Grizim, and we wanted to see how an almost-dead religion, claiming to be of Jewish roots, observes the sacrificial rite. Perhaps it would even offer us a glimpse into the beauty and grandeur of what the Korban Pesach in the Beis HaMikdash was like, may it be rebuilt speedily in our days. Recognizing, however, that this was a non-Jewish group offering sacrifices outside of Yerushalayim, we asked several *poskim* about the propriety



READY FOR THE RITE Among hundreds of onlookers, pieces of olive wood are dropped into the fire, while the “shochet” (R) prepares for the moment of sunset



NO BROKEN BONES Ari Z. and Ari G. examine the whole carcass, after the Samaritan high priest (Top) is escorted to the seat of honor

of attending the event, and were assured that it was not halachically problematic. We were not disappointed by our visit.

Pesach Cleaning (Again) As Pesach approaches, most Jewish households go into frantic preparation mode, with last-minute arrangements that include finishing up the remaining bits of bread and noodles, buying matzoh, macaroons, and other Passover necessities, and cleaning the house of crumbs. As we entered this Samaritan village along with the throngs of other tourists, the locals were indeed frantically preparing for Pesach in the same manner, just a month later.

But what’s not included in our to-do list is purchasing a live lamb for the Korban Pesach and readying the pit for roasting it. But 2,000 years ago, when the Beis HaMikdash stood in Yerushalayim, that was most certainly a concern of the typical household, based on the biblical injunction that each person must eat from the Passover sacrifice. Indeed, that is exactly what the Shomronim were doing as we meandered through their small town.

So who are the Shomronim, and why do they preserve this ancient ritual? The 760-strong Shomronim — probably the smallest ethnic group in the world — are actually the remnants of a group mentioned in Tanach and whose halachic status is

discussed extensively in the Gemara. Today their community is divided between the Tel Aviv suburb of Holon and Har Grizim — overlooking Shechem.

After exiling much of the Ten Tribes (*Melachim II 17:24*), the king of Assyria brought other peoples into the emptied cities of Israel, a cross-population transfer technique the Assyrians used in all their occupied lands as a method of reducing rebellions among the natives. Among the people brought into Israel were the Kutim, who settled in Samaria, and were thus later known as Shomronim or Samaritans.

After the Shomronim were plagued by lions because they were worshipping idols, a *kohein* was sent from Assyria to teach them

This is where the lambs would be roasted, cooked whole without any of the bones broken, as the Torah stipulates

Torah, and they evidently converted — although they continued their idol worship. This led to great ambiguity in their halachic status, and Chazal discuss in numerous places in the Talmud whether they were “*gerei emes*” or “*gerei arayos*” — sincere converts or not — even devoting an entire *Masechet Kutim* to these laws. In the end, Chazal declared them to be non-Jews. Furthermore, they never accepted the halachah of the Oral Torah.

The Kutim, however, give a different version of their origin. They claim to be descendants of the tribes of Efraim and Menasheh, plus some Kohanim and Leviim, arguing that they are the “true Jews,” preserving the original Judaism. They therefore do not call themselves “Shomronim,” after the region, but rather “Shamerim” — which means “the observant” in Samaritan Hebrew — or “Bene-Yisrael.” This claim is ancient, although Rabi Meir in *Bereishis Rabbah* mocks their assertion.

Still, the Shomronim today claim an absolute belief in monotheism and total adherence to the Torah. However, they reject the rest of the books of Tanach and the oral traditions as preserved by Chazal. Our contact person in the community was able to effortlessly rattle off large sections of Chumash by heart and he reported that by age six or seven he knew a good deal of the Torah.

Fires on the Mountain The Shomronim go about their practices quietly, but the Samaritan Korban

Pesach has become quite a tourist attraction, and already as we arrived at the bottom of the mount, we saw just how big it would be this year, with the army blocking off the access road and requiring everyone to park below and take shuttle buses up. The other passengers on our shuttle, like the mobs that we later encountered up on the mountain, were an interesting cross section of the population: Tel Avivians, chareidim from Bnei Brak, a group of British English teachers who are spending a year in Shechem, and a group of seniors from Rishon L’Tzion.

We waited for our Samaritan contact person, who smoothly escorted us into the enclosed area and showed us to our VIP seats (which were prearranged by a friend who is a Knesset member), cheerfully answering our many questions about their customs. Throughout the evening we managed to speak to quite a few Samaritans who were friendly and forthcoming in explaining their foreign-yet-familiar rituals.

In the inner area, we were overwhelmed by six three-meter-deep fire pits. This is where the lambs would be roasted, cooked whole without any of the bones broken, as the Torah stipulates. The heat from the pits is fearsome, and we were surprised to see young boys walking so near the edges that we were afraid of somebody falling in. Each family unit has its own animal and several are assigned to each pit where the sheep are roasted.

A tumult in the crowd alerted us to



a solemn procession coming down the main street of the village. Their high priest and helpers arrived in ornamental religious garb, and the gates to the inner section were now closed. We were fortunate to be inside, together with army brass, politicians, and other communal representatives.

Between the village entrance and the ceremonial enclosure, we passed the Samaritans' house of worship, which, like many of the buildings, included a mezuzah — but not the rolled parchment type that graces our doorways. Our *mesorah* is that the mezuzah contains the first two paragraphs of the Shema written on parchment; theirs have biblical verses of their choice, engraved on stone and placed above the doorway. The text is not written in the more “modern” Hebrew script known as *ksav Ashuri*, but in the ancient Hebrew script known as *ksav Ivri*.

Their Torah, too, is written in *ksav Ivri*, which was the standard script used by our ancestors before the Babylonian Exile, and which continued to be used sporadically during the Second Temple period. However, while Jews gradually and finally switched to *ksav Ashuri*, the Shomronim bucked the tide and preserved a modified version of the ancient script.

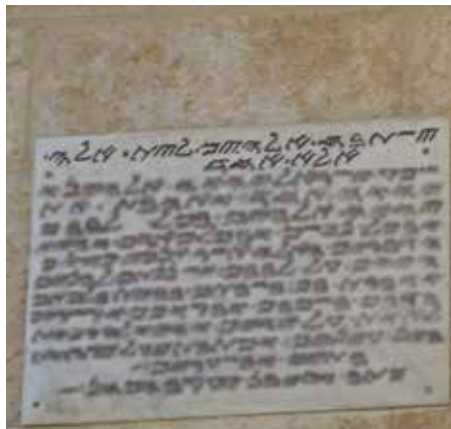
The preservation of the ancient script is mentioned in writings throughout the generations: The Ramban sought the help of the Samaritans in deciphering the texts of ancient coins; the 15th-century Rav Yaakov Tam dealt with the issue of using a *paroches* from a Cairo Samaritan synagogue that contained inscriptions in Samaritan script; and in the 1500s the Radbaz was asked about using large,

erased Samaritan tombstones that had been stolen by non-Jews and then sold to Jews in Egypt.

The afternoon had been spent in preparation. The young men lighting the fires with huge pieces of heavy olive wood were all wearing white garments and headdresses instead of their usual street clothes. In years past, the Muslims made them wear a red head covering to distinguish them from the neighboring Muslims. This has become their weekday garb, but on their Sabbath and holidays they wear white.

About 50 lambs were brought into the enclosure, all to be slaughtered at the same second. The Torah instructs that the Korban Pesach should be slaughtered “*bein ha'arbaim*” — literally “between the evenings.” The Talmud understands this to mean all afternoon, but the Samaritans require that it take place exactly at the instant of sunset. As sunset approached, the elderly high priest (replacing the high priest who passed away suddenly, just a few days before their Pesach) entered the area, mounted a platform dressed in an interesting silk, tallis-like cloth with green stripes.

He began reciting prayers and verses from *Exodus* in an ancient Hebrew pronunciation. For example, when he got to Hashem's name, instead of pronouncing it as it is written, he uses the Aramaic word for the “the Name” similar to our use of the word Hashem. Much of it was recited in unison, and clearly most of the participants knew the *nusach* by heart. They are used to a long prayer service, as their Sabbath davening, almost all of it in their unique Aramaic dialect, goes from 3



GOOD YOM TOV A dab of blood on the forehead is a *brachah* for a happy holiday; a Samaritan “mezuzah” with the verse of choice graces the lintel

to 6 a.m. While most of the dialect was unintelligible to us, at one point we heard a repeated mention of “*Elokei Avraham, Elokei Yitzchak, v'Elokei Yaakov.*”

Because of the biblical commandment “an altar of earth shall you make” (*Shemos* 20:21), the Shomronim do not have a raised altar as the Jews had, but rather make a trench lined with stones, fulfilling the verse, “If you build for Me an altar of stones” (*Shemos* 20:22). Most of the men were standing along the long trench with their sheep, while the women were seated in a separate area.

“**Kill It at Dusk**” The liturgic chanting lasted for about half an hour, and then suddenly it sounded like someone had opened a beehive. The assembled realized that the actual slaughter time was approaching, and so they flipped the sheep, pulled out their knives, and then the high priest recited the verse from *Shemos* 12:6: “And the whole assembly of the children of Israel shall kill it at dusk.” At that instant there was a sudden flurry of blessings and commotion as the slaughterers each did their job.

Next the butchers and flayers got to work. It was difficult to know what was happening as so much simultaneous activity was taking place. We noticed that many of the slaughterers had drops of blood on their foreheads. As *shochtim* ourselves, we understood that sometimes the blood splatters and leaves drops on your face. But that so many of them should have blood on the forehead seemed too coincidental. It turns out that this is their way of saying “*chag sameach.*” They approach each other and dab some of the blood on the other person's forehead as they hug and wish each other a happy holiday.

Women started appearing with pita-like matzoh that had been baked the night before, and they explained that during that day they were prohibited to eat both matzoh and *chometz*, but now they could eat the matzoh. Several men showed up carrying large bundles of hyssops (*eizov*), which were dipped in the blood and taken back to the houses where it was smeared on the lintel.

Soon there was a choking smell of burning hide — because the hide is not eaten, it must be burnt. Indeed, the innards were already being burnt within minutes, and anything left over would also be burnt in fulfillment of the verse in *Shemos* 12:10. Salt was placed on the carcasses, in fulfillment of the Torah instruction that



Top Signs You Have a Bed Bug Infestation:

Specks

During the mid 90's however, the bed bugs seemed to have disappeared without a trace with barely a few isolated incidents and sightings across the globe. However off late, the insects have been making a resounding comeback across the world with countries like the US and several European countries having to grapple with a severe bed bug problem on their hands.

Concerned You May Have Bed Bugs?



Hassle-Free Total Bed Bug Eradication Through Heat Treatment

ThermaRid

877.987.7013
www.thermarid.com



Ancient Tribe on the Mountain of Blessing

Talmudic literature is filled with references to the Kutim, or the Shomronim. Were they true converts, or did they convert only out of fear? Some of the halachic discussions include such questions as whether the *shechitah* of a Kuti is kosher or whether his matzoh is acceptable. Regarding some mitzvos, the Gemara asserts that they were exceedingly careful and could be relied upon.

But most of these discussions were only relevant before the big schism, related in *Chullin* 6a, that the Kutim were found to be worshipping a dove-shaped idol on Har Grizim. They were then declared to be non-Jews. Rabbi Meir declared their wine as the wine of goyim and their *shechitah* as that of a non-Jew. From that point forward, halachah has treated them as non-Jews.

If they do consider themselves keepers of the original tradition, why then do they offer their sacrifices on Har Grizim and not in Yerushalayim? Examining their version of the Torah together with recent archaeological excavations on Har Grizim can explain it. When they first settled the region, Yerushalayim was in the separate Kingdom of Yehudah; later it was in ruins. Thus, they ever-so-slightly edited the Torah, adding a verse after the Ten Commandments stating that Har Grizim will be the location of the permanent altar.

After all, Har Grizim is the “mountain of blessings,” where, upon entering the Land, half the tribes stood and delivered blessings while the tribes on the opposite Har Eval delivered curses. And in the Samaritan bible, Yehoshua’s altar at Har Eval was “moved” to Har Grizim.

Archaeologists have actually found the ruins of a Samaritan temple built on Har Grizim in the first half of the fifth century BCE. That site, with all of the subsequently discovered ruins, was opened within the past year to the public as a national park. On display is the stone that they claim was the site of the Akeidah, which they also believe took place on Har Grizim and not on Jerusalem’s Har HaMoriah.

The Babylonians and later the Romans destroyed the Temples in Jerusalem, but who destroyed this Samaritan temple? The answer: the Jews. In about 128 BCE, the Hasmonean king Yochanan Hyrcanus destroyed the Samaritan temple that had stood on Har Grizim for over 200 years. Only a few remnants of it exist today. The day of their temple’s destruction is actually listed as a holiday in *Megillas Taanis*. The Kutim wanted Alexander Mokdon (aka Alexander the Great) to destroy the Beis HaMikdash, but the decree was abolished and their own sanctuary was destroyed instead.

Because of the centrality of Har Grizim, the Shomronim direct their prayers in its direction and make pilgrimages here on their festivals. In fact, the swapping of Har Grizim for Yerushalayim so irked Chazal that *Maseches Kutim* concludes with the

passage: “When will we take them back? When they renounce Har Grizim and accept Yerushalayim and *techiyas hameisim* [resurrection of the dead].”

Despite the animosity between the Jews and the Shomronim, their ranks swelled, and by the fourth century CE they numbered over a million in the entire Mediterranean area, briefly winning independence from the Byzantine Empire. But subsequent failed rebellions, oppression by the local Arab population, and assimilation thinned their ranks; in 1919 there were only 141 Samaritans in the entire world. The community has rebounded, though, and today the Samaritans number over 750 individuals. This rejuvenated group is divided almost equally between the city of Holon and their refurbished village overlooking Shechem. The Samaritans in Holon see themselves as fully Israeli and serve in the IDF; those on Har Grizim live under the Palestinian Authority.

In recent decades, Samaritans have allowed their men to intermarry with Jewish women, provided that the woman accepts the Samaritan religion; however, rabbinic authorities never allow intermarriage with Samaritans. Marriage with a Kuti was already prohibited even before they were declared full-fledged non-Jews. There are even opinions that a Kuti who converts is not permitted to marry a Jew other than another convert. Because the Jewish option isn’t realistic, another recent solution to the shortage of Samaritan marriage partners is the importation of non-Jewish brides from the Ukraine.



PRIESTLY BLESSINGS The ancient Aramaic chanting sounds as mysterious today as it did a hundred years ago

every *korban* have salt on it (*Vayikra* 2:13). Because they view the matzoh as sacrificial as well, they add salt to the flour-water dough.

At this point, many of the Samaritan women and children left while the men continued to butcher the animals in fulfillment of other commandments. They removed the right forearm of every animal in preparation for giving it to the priests as gifts, and they excised the *gid hanasheh*. During this entire process, the head remained attached because of the prohibition to not break any bones of the *korban* (*Bamidbar* 9:12). In fact, one young man told us that even when they eat it, they are careful not to break any of the sheep’s bones.

Once the whole lambs were put on huge stakes, they were lowered down into the hot pits to cook. The fire would incinerate the meat, so as soon as a carcass went in, a cloth was put over the pit and children shoveled wet mud onto it. This cut off the supply of oxygen, putting out the flame and letting the heat do its trick. The aroma was a barbecue-lover’s heaven, and now we could dream about what it must have been like in Yerushalayim during the actual Pascal sacrifice.

Later, when it was well past dark, the tiny Samaritan community would sit down to their equivalent of a Passover Seder complete with a Pascal lamb. Every single one of them would be tasting of the *korban*. Our host admitted that he is a vegetarian but he, too, would have a little taste, approximately a “quarter *zayit*,” he told us. According to Samaritan tradition, anyone who does not taste of the meat essentially severs his link to the community. And, because there is no concept of bar or bas mitzvah status, even the tiniest infant is given a taste of the *korban*, just as every weaned child fasts on the Shomronim’s only fast day, Yom Kippur.

While we knew we were watching a rite performed by a small, non-Jewish minority living within our midst, we nonetheless left with a flood of interesting and conflicting thoughts and emotions. Who really was this community? How many of their traditions are remnants from the ancient practices of our own ancestors? Is this what our forefathers’ Passover looked like when the Temple stood in Jerusalem, and if not, how did it differ? And most significantly, how does this resemble the future Passover when there will be a rebuilt Temple? As we made our way down the mountain, we overheard many Jews —who, like us, had come to observe — declaring wistfully the same thoughts we harbored: “Next year in Yerushalayim!” ●

eastern union
FUNDING

The country's second largest privately owned commercial mortgage company on a transaction volume basis

<p><i>Rate Modification</i> 5.5% down to 3.875% 324 units</p> <p>\$14,600,000 Harrisburg, PA</p>	<p><i>Sobo Office</i> Permanent Financing 12,300 SF</p> <p>\$8,500,000 New York, NY</p>
<p><i>Mixed Use High-rise</i> Permanent Financing 122 Residential, 22 Commercial</p> <p>\$6,100,000 Wilkes Barre, PA</p>	<p><i>Windy Hill Shopping Center</i> Acquisition 128,821 SF</p> <p>\$3,975,000 Myrtle Beach, SC</p>
<p><i>Clarks Lane Apartments</i> Acquisition Loan 80 units</p> <p>\$3,500,000 Baltimore, MD</p>	<p><i>Retail Center</i> Permanent Financing 15,000 SF</p> <p>\$2,800,000 Bronx, NY</p>
<p><i>Multifamily Refinance</i> 98 Units</p> <p>\$6,500,000 Brooklyn, NY</p>	<p><i>Retail Center Refinance</i> 13,368 SF</p> <p>\$3,000,000 Queens, NY</p>
<p><i>Crown Heights Multifamily</i> Permanent Financing 54 Units</p> <p>\$2,750,000 Brooklyn, NY</p>	<p><i>Jersey City Apartments</i> Refinance 33 units</p> <p>\$2,775,000 Jersey City, NJ</p>

Some of the many deals we closed in March

<p>Ira Zlotowitz President 917.597.2197 iraz@easternuf.com</p>	<p>Abraham Bergman Managing Partner 917.670.3824 abeb@easternuf.com</p>
---	--

866.862.4800 • www.easternuf.com