

The Samaritans And The Passover Sacrifice

(WZPS) — Israel's Samaritans strictly adhere to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. They thus practice very specific laws, customs and traditions regarding the keeping of kosher, women's 'purification' period, matchmaking and marriage ceremonies, the eight-day period for the circumcision of a newborn son, special prayer position and the holding of festivals.

Zev Tolan tells us a little about the Samaritans' observance of the Passover sacrifice of the paschal lamb, which incidentally marks the beginning of the Samaritan year.

By Zev Golan

(WZPS) — "Preparations for the sacrifice are complete," says Benjamin Tsedaka. Every family already has its matzah. The fires have been burning for hours. No meat, bread or matzah has been eaten all day, to ensure an appetite for the lamb. The High Priest arrives at dusk, ascends the high stone and reads the Haggadah. The lambs are slaughtered, cooked and eaten with matzot and bitter herbs."

Benjamin Tsedaka's account of a Passover sacrifice may sound as if it took place in Jerusalem 2,500 years ago, but Tsedaka lives in Holon, Israel in the 1980's and is describing events he has seen and participated in. While Jews today no longer make the Passover sacrifice or even pray on the disputed Temple Mount in Jerusalem, another "Temple Mount" - today less disputed but once the subject of fierce controversy and even battle in ancient Israel - is the object of regular pilgrimages by those Children of Israel who are called the Samaritans.

"We are Israelites," declares Tsedaka. "When the Jewish People returned to Israel from exile in Egypt, the Samaritans were already here. We never left." According to Tsedaka, he is a 125th generation Israeli: The Samaritans have in fact

been centered around their holy mountain, Mount Gerizim near Nablus in Samaria, for thousands of years. Although they numbered over one million people in the 4th century, their numbers dwindled through pogroms, persecution and forced conversions, to a mere 146 by the end of Ottoman rule.

The creation of Israel was a great boon to the Samaritans who are now enjoying a renaissance of sorts and about 535 of them today live in Hablus and Holon. "We still use the ancient Hebrew script," notes Tsedaka, "our priests are descended from Aaron and our music has been recognized as the oldest religious music in the world." The Samaritans, however, are probably most famous for having kept alive the tradition of the Passover sacrifice as described in the Bible.

The Samaritans' Passover sacrifice of the paschal lamb takes place on Mt. Gerizim, 80 meters from the summit. The high priest climbs upon a large stone and gives the signal to slaughter the sheep whilst reading the story of the Exodus from Egypt. The sheep are slaughtered as the congregation raises its voice in prayer, then the sheep are cleaned, rinsed and salted. They are then placed in ovens that have been dug into the earth and sealed with shrubs and wet earth. Six hours later the ovens are opened and each family comes for his portion of the sacrifice. An outsider at the ceremony may feel as if he has been transported back 3,000 years in time.

"Even the Jews continued the ritual of sacrifice after their Temple's destruction," Tsedaka continues. "But the Samaritans believe that God chose Mt. Gerizim as his only holy place. Historians and rabbis are divided over whether the conflict over the relative holiness of Jerusalem and Mt. Gerizim caused the split between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of

Israel in 930 BCE. In any case, today's Samaritans say they are the descendants of the ten northern tribes, never completely 'lost' as Jewish tradition holds, while rabbinical sources regard the Samaritans as descendants of the Assyrian colonizers brought to Nablus in 721 and who consequently converted to Judaism.

The Samaritan Pentateuch, interestingly, resembles the Jewish version except that Mt. Gerizim, not Jerusalem, is referred to as God's chosen dwelling place.

On top of the holy mountain, Mt. Gerizim, are twelve stones supposedly put there by Joshua when Israel entered Canaan, as an altar to Adam and his son Seth. The altar is said to be the place where Abraham prepared Isaac for sacrifice. Archaeologists are currently attempting to determine whether any Temple ever stood there, but have so far found no evidence of this sort.

Benjamin Tsedaka and his brother Yefet have published the world's only bi-weekly quadrilingual (English, Arabic, Ancient Hebrew) newspaper, "A.B.," for 17 years and are fanatically devoted to preserving the fascinating history of their people and furthering the study of their history and literature.

TEL AVIV (JTS) — Israel Air Force planes attacked terrorist targets south of Sidon Monday morning and returned safely to their bases, a military spokesman announced. The attack was the second since Friday and the ninth in Lebanon since the beginning of the year.

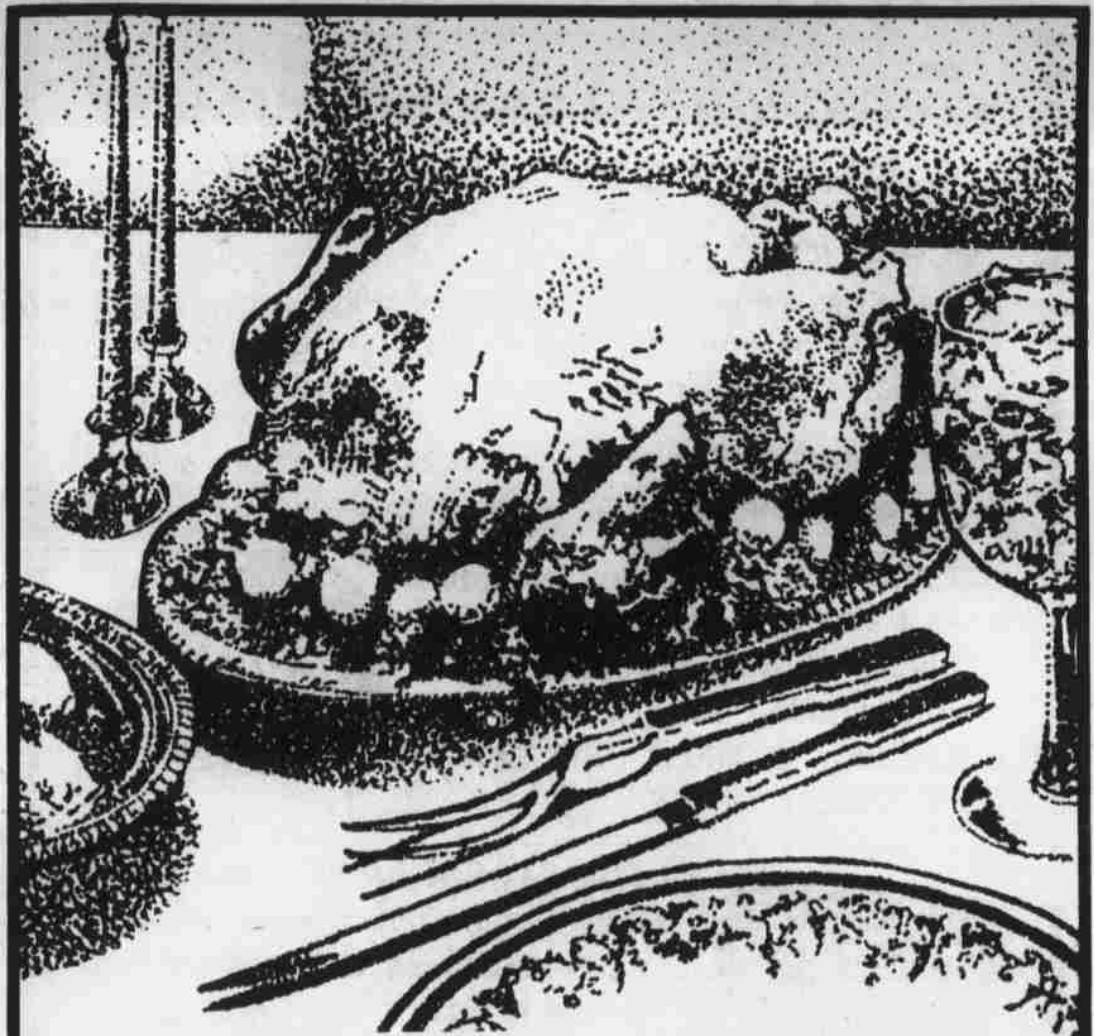
It followed the firing of Katyusha rockets into Upper Galilee Sunday and several hostile acts against IDF units in the South Lebanon security zone over the weekend.

The targets were described as buildings which served as terrorist headquarters for planning attacks on Israel and as an arms storage depot.

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