CHAPTER 4

No Exit, No Entrance? The Bounds of Community

Theoretically an innate and unalienable property, Samaritan identity may in practice be lost or won in a lifetime. Crossing the ethnic and religious boundaries involves complex and highly individual processes, the structural linchpins of which, however, remain always the same, namely descent and religion. In brief: membership is denied if the individual threatens the Samaritan community’s rules of descent by violating the related patriarchal code of shame. At the same time, as we have seen, “being Samaritan means being religious.” The effects of descent are annulled once the individual, for whatever reasons, veers out of the community of practice.

It is obvious that the boundaries of the Samaritan community were not impermeable in the past. In antiquity, a mingling of the different currents within Israelite religion seems to have been normal; the Byzantines forced many to convert, and also during the Islamic era the minority lost members to the majority time and again. In the twentieth century, questions of Samaritan ethnicity and belonging were posed under changed auspices and with a new urgency: the Israeli national state offers social and cultural integration, while problems of demographic viability have made ethnic endogamy more and more impractical.

Nevertheless, due to its religious autonomy, the Samaritan community is still in a position to define its own rules of identity. Within the double framework of religion and descent, it continues to enforce absolute notions concerning who belongs and who ceases to belong to the community, who may join it and who never will. It is this modern web of identity that I shall discuss in the present chapter.

Exit: How to Lose a Samaritan Identity

The readiest explanation Samaritans give for cases of defection from the community is apostasy (perīshah or neshīrah [H]), used here as a blanket term for rejection of the principles of faith and/or deliberate religious negligence. Such behavior earns a ban (herem [H]), irrevocably issued by the high priest. In practice, however, acts of formal religious renunciation, the epitome of which would be official conversion to another religion, are not the principal concern of people in the community. Such transfers of allegiance normally occur,
if at all, at the end of protracted processes of alienation, when the individual is already out of sight. But these are processes that the community tries to nip in the bud.

**Spatial Boundaries**

As a safeguard against apostasy, great value is placed on individuals’ obedient religious practice, the essence of which is visible presence during times of ritual. In their reflections on holiday routine, Samaritans are emphatic about Shabbāt and festivals being celebrations of community. Their primary purpose is the tightening of bonds between the individuals and the group. People often assert a personal need for recurrent participation in ritual processes, notably the prescribed sabbatical rest from work, “in order to feel that I am Samaritan”—a feeling which, they claim, is lost during the rat race of the workweek under a foreign religious hegemony. In this vein, the sabbatical laws and customs are generally considered the crucial aspect of religious observance. There are of course other aspects as well, but the Sabbath lends people’s belonging a distinct form, limits it spatially, and enforces mutual control. Shabbāt observance consists, in terms of action, of male-dominated prayer and pilgrimage, and of the presence of the whole community within the bounds of Samaritan territory.

While the Samaritans do not have the rabbinical notion of ʿerūv [H], deliberate withdrawal from the Samaritan precinct on Shabbāt and holidays is forbidden. Trips abroad are legitimate, but people are expected to make an effort to keep them short and to return before Friday afternoon. When this is not possible, the place of accommodation is thought of as Samaritan habitat, and prayer rugs are rolled out in the hotel room at the prescribed hours. The Samaritan habit of traveling in groups stems not least from the necessity of mutually monitoring religious performance. Even more sensitive than regular Shabbātōt are the holidays, especially Pesaḥ and Yōm Kippūr, when no Samaritan will be away on a journey. On Yōm Kippūr, everybody must fast and on Pesaḥ, everybody must join the ceremony on the sacrificial ground. A commonly used phrase has it that “he who does not eat from the ḋorbān even one time, and he who does not fast even one Yōm Kippūr, is aḥram [A] (under religious ban).” Exceptions apply only for reasons of health.

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1 This is a bounded, private area of movement, defined by local rabbis, to which religious Jews are confined on Shabbat.

2 Exceptions are granted only for severe cases: hospitalization and confinement to bed release the individual from the obligation of presence. On Pesaḥ 2002, for instance, the families of two brothers stayed behind in Holon since the daughter of one brother, who is the daughter-