chapter 8

Single, Samaritan, Male: A Local Discourse on Minority and Choice

In the previous two chapters, we have considered what lies behind Samaritan marriage. We have examined its close interlinking with social structure and its embedding in the cultural history of the Middle East and Mediterranean. A wide range of aspects were illuminated, such as descent and segmentation, the ambivalence concerning consanguinity inherent to religious law and lore, and the possible linkage between modern kin marriage and obsolete incestuous practices. All of these features have one thing in common: they escape the awareness of Samaritans. When asked to make sense of the community’s matchmaking habits, Samaritans hardly invoke the abstractions of a segmentary social structure. And apart from the occasional hint at “Arab custom” as a sort of alien element in their marriage preferences, they mention neither religion nor history (indeed, I suspect many would be appalled at the association of cousin marriage with ancient incest). None of this is how Samaritans would explain marriage, so now it is time to pay attention to exactly that. As a matter of fact, people in the community articulate their thoughts about marriage mainly by way of numerous individualized, utilitarian accounts whose theme is not the structural mechanisms of endogamy but the community’s minority condition. The perpetually hot topics in this discourse are the availability of spouses on a limited marriage market and the challenge of keeping up a jeopardized tradition in the face of intermarriage and social integration. Thus, when talking about marriage, Samaritans are talking about the problems that threaten the community. This has not changed over the twenty or so years I have known the community, even though the emphasis seems to have shifted from marriage per se to larger social issues, for reasons that will be discussed in a later section of this chapter.

The Samaritan approach to marriage is no ethnographic anomaly. Wherever anthropologists of the Middle East have been attentive to native discourse, we see locals stressing the rational and strategic aspects of marriage over structural forces and presenting themselves as pragmatic actors on the marriage market. Whether the dominant stakes are political,1

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1 In marriages solidify agnatic groups and secure political allegiance. See Barth 1954; Cohen 1965; Lancaster 1997.
Figure 20 Young Samaritans posing in front of the entrance to the Mount Gerizim synagogue, during the 2012 Pesah week. Most of them are residents of Holon in their teens and twenties and form the main local recruitment pool of spouses. Establishing a marital relationship, however, is more difficult than one might assume when looking at this cheerful photograph, especially for the boys, who are generally at a demographic disadvantage. Photo: Ori Orhof, Modi’in.