

The Family Politic

Basically, as a mode of social organization, segmentary and tribal family structures are a premodern institution. Still, in many Middle Eastern communities, such as among the Samaritans, this institution is alive and well even under modern conditions, forming a significant part of local identities. It is from this perspective that my closing chapter sets out to bundle all the factors of the contemporary Samaritan experience discussed so far: history and place, religious traditions, internal and external interactions, segmentation and the relevance of the family for individual lives and identities, and marriage as well as politics are brought together for a general view of the inner workings of the community. Taking issues of stratification and power distribution as a point of departure, the following sections present the complex matrix of social identities and dynamics in which Samaritans are situated today.

The Old Order: Priests and Bankers

The most obvious stratification within the Samaritan community divides the priestly family of the Tribe of Levi from the non-priests identified with the Tribes of Joseph. The colloquial terminology that differentiates “the priestly family” (*mishpaḥat ha-kohānīm* [H]/‘ā’ilat al-kāhānah [A]) from lay or “normal families” (*mishpāḥōt regūlōt* [H]) intrinsically implies two different status categories. So does the distinction between “priests” (*Kohānīm*) and “Israelites” (*benē-Yisrā’ēl*, or simply *Yisrā’ēl/Yisrā’ēlīm*) or “the people” (*ha-‘am* [H]/*ash-sha’ab* [A]). Epithets of the priestly family, sometimes spontaneously created, describe them as “spiritual leaders” (*manhīgīm rūḥānīyīm* [H]), “the flagship of the community” (*sefīnat ha-degel shel ha-ēdah* [H]), or “Servants of the Holy Scriptures” (*shamshē ha-mikhtāvīm ha-qedūshīm* [H]/*khadamat al-kuṭub al-muqaddisā* [A]).¹ The elite status of the priests is of course part of the Levitical laws and thus an article of faith.

According to this tradition, the exercise of religious functions is incumbent exclusively on the high priest (*kohēn gādōl*), a number of senior male representatives of the priestly clan, and a few other officiating priests. These per-

¹ See *A.B.*, nos. 811–814, April 26, 2002, pp. 63–94, for the use of these terms in an autochthonous portrait of the priestly family.

sons preside over the animal sacrifice, the prayer cult, and the life-cycle rituals. They keep and guard the Torah scrolls and interpret the text. Therefore, they are the recognized legal experts and guarantors of order in the community. On a more informal level, they are also believed to share a magical competence not extant in other clans. Being technically a splinter group from the Tribe of Levi, the priestly clan is thought of as a divinely chosen family. The functional charisma of the officiating priests and the inherited charisma of the total family reinforce each other: the priests provide much of the symbolism of the celebration of community, while the lineage plays a vital role in the narrative of Samaritan ethnogenesis (seen as they are as descendants of Uzi, the savior of the Gerizim cult). In Chapters 1, 3 and 5 I addressed the descent and functions of the priestly clan; the following paragraphs are dedicated to their social status.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the high priest was a person with remarkable social authority. Mary Elizabeth Rogers wrote:

The Samaritans seem really to represent one family. The people look to the hereditary priest [‘Amrām] as their father and divinely appointed guide, and he apparently knows the history and character of every member of the community. He is king, magistrate, physician, teacher, counselor, and friend of all.²

The high priest dominated in a number of social and political fields in which his modern successors are almost entirely without influence. For example, he was the political and cultural representative of the community. The Ottoman administration granted religious minorities seats in the *diwān*, the provincial council, in proportion to their numbers, and the lone seat reserved for the Samaritans was always occupied by the incumbent *kohēn gādōl*. The high priest was, moreover, the spokesman of the community when it was necessary to make contact with the external powers from which the Samaritans sought protection. He was acquainted with British consuls and ambassadors, and he acted as the foremost expert on Samaritan history and tradition in exchanges with the European scholars, tourists, and philanthropists who visited the Samaritans (see Chapter 2).

² Rogers 1862/1989, p. 252. This impression is echoed in Petermann 1860, p. 269, and Mills 1864, p. 183. However, nineteenth-century high priests had many internal competitors and jealous rivals who endeavored to undermine their position. For a more nuanced picture that reveals the internal pressure the high priest was under, see Shehadeh 2001, p. 154.