

Sofi Tsedaka

Probably not the last headline to describe her as a good Samaritan. Don't blame **Bas Springer!**

The Israeli singer and actress Sofi Tsedaka grew up in the Samaritan community and converted to Judaism when she was 20. She became a successful model and star in soap operas and went on to host children's TV shows. She released a few pop singles but currently sings new interpretations of songs from the ancient Samaritan community as well as work from famous 20th Century Arabic composers. Her deep spiritual songs transcend genres and open hearts and minds. In the meantime she prays for peace in the Middle East.

The stunning location of the age-old Tower of David in Jerusalem alone is enough to make the meeting with Sofi Tsedaka memorable. Prior to her beautiful midnight concert at the Mekudeshet Festival 2017 she explains about the origin of the Samaritans, probably best known for the parable of the Good Samaritan in the New Testament. The Samaritans believe themselves to be the remnants of Israelites exiled by the Assyrians in 722 BC. They practice a religion closely linked to Judaism and venerate a version of the Old Testament, but are not Jews. Long ago the Samaritan population is thought to have topped some 1.5 million but religious persecution and economic hardship had nearly eradicated it by the early 20th Century. Today there are precisely 705 Samaritans, according to the sect's own tally.

"I was born and brought up as a Samaritan. One of the most important rules I learned is that you marry inside the community. This principle is much more important than any personal feelings. However, my older sister fell in love with a Jew from outside the community. Her feelings were so strong that she was willing to step out of the community. My father was furious. He said if she left, she would destroy us all. When I was 20 I also left the community. My father didn't talk to me for many years. I think my music is a gesture of reconciliation with the Samaritans and my father's belief."

"From a young age I wanted to sing but in the Samaritan community this was not tolerated. After I left the community I went to the prestigious Yoram Levinstein School for Drama because I wanted to become an actress. I learned how to sing while attending this school. In the beginning I sang mainstream pop music which was played on the radio. My father loved the sacred Samaritan music but this was too heavy for me."

Tsedaka's first project transformed Samaritan prayers into meditative 'chill-out' versions, which she released on her album

Genesis in 2007. She also began to appear frequently as a guest vocalist with Israeli ethnic music ensembles, performing songs based on Samaritan prayers, while expanding her repertoire to include classical Arabic vocal music. She became part of the Andalusian Orchestra in Jerusalem with which she performs regularly.

"According to the tradition, instruments are not used in Samaritan sacred music, there is only the voice. I changed the music just a little bit, adding instruments to reach a new and wider audience. The musicians in my band The Baladis play qanun, ney (flute), ud and percussion. I drew inspiration from Faiza Ahmad, Asmahan, Mohamed Abdel Wahab, Abdel Halim Hafez and Farid El-Atrache."

Asked about the lyrics on her latest CD *Sofi And The Baladis* she replies: "The openings track is called *Eloheynu*, which means 'Our God'. It's a 4000-year-old prayer. Another song, *Sea Of Mercy*, is the closing prayer of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year in Judaism. Normally I also compose songs but on this album there are only ancient Samaritan songs. The Samaritans have about 1,000 songs and prayers. I have chosen some of the most accessible ones. Hardly anybody knows much about the Samaritans. That's why in my shows I not only sing, I also explain what the songs are about, so you get a piece of history. I'm not only a singer but also a teacher."

"The Samaritans have lived for 125 generations in Israel in coexistence with Arabs and Jews. The Samaritans are multilingual and speak a mix of ancient Hebrew, which is very close to Arabic, modern Hebrew and Arabic. The Arabs and the Israelis are brothers. They have a lot of problems but I hope they will find a solution for peace."

"I wish those segments of the population could be on stage for one hour, to show the people the beauty of their respective cultures. We always see the violent side but we never see how beautiful both cultures are. I want to break down the borders between them. Imagine how beautiful the Middle East could be if we would live in peace. We have great food, great music, great history and beautiful cultures."

"When I left the community my father told me 'the Jews will never consider you as a Jew, they will always see you as a Samaritan.' Now I think he was right. Twenty years after my conversion I'm still seen as a Samaritan. The only people who see me as a Jew are the Samaritans. The Samaritan heritage will always be somewhere inside me because it's my home. You can't run away from yourself. In the end we are all the same. Everybody wants a better world for their children. I want children to grow up in a beautiful place. That's why I pray for better relations between Arabs and Jews."

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