

How the Karaite Community
in the United States
is Facing the Future

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Preface

I chose to write my thesis about Karaites and Karaite Judaism because of my husband David's Egyptian Karaite heritage and to preserve a tradition for my two children. On his father's side, David is the great-great grandson of Hakham Moussa ben Avraham haLevi who had moved from Jerusalem to Cairo to become the chief rabbi of the Karaite community of Egypt. He was given the name "Al Qudsi," which can be translated as "man from Jerusalem," as "Al Quds" is the Arabic name for that city.

I was introduced to Karaite Judaism came shortly after marrying my husband. My initial understanding of Karaism was that Karaites had no issues with mixing milk and meat, ate rice and lamb – but not yogurt, vinegar or wine – on Passover, and spoke a loud and animated mixture of Arabic, English and French when they got together. Within the mainstream Jewish community, the term "Karaite" elicits a wide variety of responses; most Jews have never heard of Karaites, and many of those who have are surprised that there are any left. Depending on the community and synagogue, their Jewish identity may be questioned and/or rejected.

My initial plan was to look at Karaite Judaism as a whole, but the topic solidified with a comment my thesis adviser, Professor Joseph Davis of Gratz College, wrote in an email, "The Karaites have had to face modernity like everybody else." This thesis is about Karaite Jews in the United States today, and how they have carried on their tradition, and faced contemporary challenges.

I set out to learn as much as I could about Karaite Jews in the US, with a focus on those who are currently living and observing Karaite Judaism. I began with members of Congregation B'nai Israel in the San Francisco suburb of Daly City, California, the only Karaite synagogue in the

United States and a community largely made up of Karaite Jews who emigrated to the US from Egypt.

Also included will be experiences of individual Jews of Karaite descent or heritage in other areas of the US who continue to maintain a level of Karaite practice and tradition while living and worshipping in various mainstream Jewish communities, or who consider themselves to be secular Jews. In addition to being born into a Karaite family, a Jewish person may adopt Karaite practice, and non-Jews converting to Judaism may find a home with Karaite practice. For example, James Walker, a gentile who converted to Judaism through the Karaite community in 2013, was a finalist in the North American Regional Finals of the International Bible Competition held in Israel this past November. Several personal stories of converts to Karaite Judaism will be discussed later.

Methodology and Acknowledgments

Several books have been written about both Karaite and Rabbanite Egyptian Jews, and Prof. Joel Beinin, in his book Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry, devoted a few chapters to the Bay Area community, in which he spent time observing and interviewing individuals. Ruth Tsoffar, author of The Stains of Culture: An Ethno-reading of Karaite Jewish Women, did the bulk of her fieldwork in this community.¹ Additional resources and more recent writings can be found in the bibliography at the end of this thesis.

Much has changed since 1998; descendants of the original immigrants have grown up and married Rabbanite Jews or non-Jews, and while Karaite heritage may remain at the forefront, traditions and observances have often been lost. My husband's family is an example of having

¹ Wayne State University Press, 2006.

one foot in Karaite heritage and one in modern Jewish America. I expected to see a degree of acculturation and assimilation, but something I didn't expect was to learn that both Rabbanite Jews, often from Orthodox backgrounds, as well as gentiles, have been exploring Karaite Judaism and joining the community either through adoption (Jews) or formal conversion (gentiles). For a sect of Judaism that many – if they've even heard of it – assume is extinct, seeing interest, especially among millennials, gives me hope that Judaism can be enriched with an understanding of a pluralistic, biblically-based approach that puts the onus on the individual to apply reason and accepted exegetical principles to study the mitzvot and live an authentic Jewish life within the community.

To view Karaite Judaism as a rejection of the Oral Law and by extension, as a rejection of the rabbinic authorities who interpreted it for the masses, would be a gross oversimplification.

According to Professor Dr. Barry Walfish, anyone who studies the medieval and later Karaite sources will see them clearly “as expressions of an authentic and creative religious movement.”²

Since little has been written during the past 20-30 years about the Karaite community in the United States, my thesis required a significant amount of original research. Beginning with family—pretty much everyone in the Egyptian Jewish community is related in some way—I looked to Shawn Lichaa who maintains the blog abluethread.com, for direction. I am greatly indebted to Shawn for his assistance; he introduced me to other individuals who are passionate and can speak articulately about Karaite Judaism and their experiences, was extremely generous with his time via phone and email, and helped me to understand the richness of his heritage.

² *Bibliographica Karaitica*, Prof. Barry Dov Walfish, Brill Academic Pub; Bilingual edition (December 2010), Page x

Other individuals who greatly contributed to this thesis, and whom I communicated with by email, through telephone interviews and in person are: Joseph Kodsi (my husband's uncle), Joseph Haroun (a cousin), Remy Pessah of San Francisco, Brenda Gazzar of the Los Angeles area, Henry Mourad of San Francisco, Tomer Mangoubi of Boston, Etay Nir of Utah, Hakham Meir Rekhavi of London, David Rosch of Switzerland, James "Yaaqov" Walker of North Carolina, and my husband, David. I thank them for their time and willingness to share their thoughts and experiences.

A Brief Overview of Karaite Judaism

The word "Kara-ism" derives from the Hebrew *Karaim* meaning "Followers of Scripture."³ While the actual beginning of Karaites as a sect of the Jewish community can't be pinpointed, it likely became distinct from Rabbinic Judaism at some point after the destruction of the Second Temple.⁴ The rabbis, who had taken on the task of creating a new way to observe Judaism and worship God in the absence of the Temple cult, considered themselves to be the inheritors of Torah from the prophets⁵ and Divinely appointed to interpret Torah for all. Those who rejected the rabbis' authority were *b'nei mikra*, "children of scripture," who believed that each person should study and learn the commandments in order to come to his or her own conclusions about how to carry them out.

The old joke that "If you have two Jews you have three opinions" can be considered even more accurate for Karaite practice. Karaism is not a "monolithic" faith where every believer agrees on

³ http://www.karaite-korner.org/main.shtml#_edn1

⁴ Some trace the origins of Karaite Judaism as a form of non-Rabbinic Judaism to the Sadducees who also celebrate Shavuot on a Sunday. Others trace the origins to Anan ben David, who broke away from the Jewish community in Babylonia in the late 8th Century CE. However, Karaite scholar Leon Nemoy and others express doubts about this. Regardless of its origins, by the 10th century there was an identifiable Karaite movement.

⁵ Pirkei Avot 1:1

every detail when interpreting Scripture. The difference has to do with authority; Conservative and Orthodox Rabbinic Jews accept the *halakhic* authority of the Talmud, *Shulchan Arukh* and other codes and *poskim* who have interpreted the *mitzvot*, but in Karaite Judaism the burden of interpretation rests on the individual and not a central authority. Inevitably, there will be differences of interpretation and understanding which the community sees as a strength rather than a weakness. This diversity “requires the individual Karaite to take personal responsibility for interpreting Scripture, basing his understanding on the merits and logic of a given interpretation. When this method is followed the correct interpretation will generally win out. What unites Karaites together is our common fellowship in the Hebrew Scriptures and desire to live by the pure unaltered instruction of the Creator of the universe.”⁶

Karaite Jews in Egypt

Throughout history, Jews living under Muslim rule generally faced less persecution than those living in Christian countries, but they were always a minority and held a lower status than the majority. Youssef El Kodosi (Joe Kodosi, my husband’s uncle) who left Egypt in 1962 wrote, “The Jews were a minority, we were 80,000 in 1946. Jews were not welcomed in government jobs; accordingly they were mainly merchants and business owners, or individual free jobs, doctors and lawyers. Jews in Egypt were never loved but were needed. After the creation of the State of Israel the true color of the country came to existence and the hatred of the Jews was as clear as the sun at noon in a clear day. Jewish women wore crosses in order to hide their true religion. Jewish businesses were robbed and the government did not take any action to protect the Jews, so many families left Egypt directly after the 1948 war between the Arabs and Israel.”⁷

⁶ Karaite-komer.org

⁷ Via email with Joe Kodosi, 11/28/2014

Joe's father – and my husband's grandfather – Morad, had been the chief engineer on the first Aswan Dam during the 1920s and 30s, attesting to the fact that there was a time when some Jews were able to achieve a measure of success in civil service. Joe ran a textiles company in Egypt until the government nationalized his business, which was among the last existing Jewish businesses. He writes, "I was put under house arrest for two weeks then forced to run the business. I did what I was ordered to do for six months, after that I was able to get an exit Visa and leave the country in January 1962. The HIAS organization was able to bring me to France. In France HIAS took advantage of a parole program that was issued by the US Congress in 1961 which allowed religiously and politically discriminated individuals to come to the USA under parole for two years, and if all the information collected about these individuals were true, then they would be granted a green card. Under that program I was granted permission to proceed to the USA. I arrived on 23rd of July, 1962, and I had a job on the 27th of the same month."⁸

Beginning in 1948 life became increasingly difficult and dangerous for Jews in Egypt, and over the next 30 plus years, most of the community emigrated, setting in Israel, the US, Canada, South America, Europe and Australia. Remy Pessah, whose husband Joe is the acting Rav of the Daly City synagogue, said that, "President Nasser was truly humiliated by the Six-Day War (1967). All along the Egyptian belief was that 'We were going to wipe out Israel'. Within six days Israel won the war. To take revenge Nasser put every Jewish man from 18-55 in prison with beating."⁹ Remy and Joe married while he was in prison and three years later were able to join family in the United States. While Joe, his brother and father were in prison, his mother left Egypt with her five other children and went to France via Italy. Family members already living in the states invited her to join them, paving the way for Remy and Joe. Coming to the US made

⁸ Via email with Joe Kodsi, 11/28/2014

⁹ From telephone conversation with Remy Pessah 1/5/2015

sense for a variety of reasons, one being that, “If she were to go to Israel it would mean she was a spy and it would mean death to her family. So she had the choice of staying in France or coming to the States.”¹⁰

Joe Kodsi’s older brother Zaki (my father-in-law) was forced to leave Egypt in 1958, found refuge in France and was finally able to enter the US with the help of HIAS, under the Hungarian quota and without a passport. He entered through Philadelphia, but quickly moved to Rochester, NY where family was already established. Through mutual friends he was set up on a blind date with Evelyn Fleisher (my mother-in-law), whom he would marry a short time later. Zaki and Joe’s sister Nazli Youssef (Nelly) chose to remain in Egypt and until her death in 2000 maintained the Karaite community’s records. Abdel Aziz (Alain) had been a jeweler in Egypt. He emigrated to France in 1962 and still lives outside of Paris with his wife, whose family is also part of the Egyptian Karaite community.

Henry Mourad, who left Egypt with his family in 1964, noted that, “Depending on the time period, life (in Egypt) was either peaceful or a hellish environment. Before 1948 the majority of Jews felt that they were treated fairly and had a good life, and some attained high positions in the Egyptian government during the era of both King Fouad and King Farouk.”¹¹ Once Israel was formed in 1948, and again after 1952 when King Farouk was deposed, a drastic change occurred, and even though life was somewhat tolerable, it was never the same again. Life deteriorated even further after 1956 when the Suez war erupted, and many Jews left, while others were deported or detained in prison camps like Joe Pessah. In addition to being president of the Karaite Jews of America, Henry is the author of Exodus II: The Promised Land¹² that tells the story of his

¹⁰ From telephone conversation with Remy Pessah 1/5/2015

¹¹ Via email from Henry Mourad, 2/25/2015

¹² Airleaf Publishing, (April 30, 2006)

family's life in Egypt, ending with their arrival at Paris' Orly airport, as they prepared to begin new lives.

Joseph Haroun's story is similar. He lives in Norwich, Connecticut, and came to the US for political reasons, "in order to survive."¹³ He had been teaching at the University of Cairo for more than 10 years and realized that he had no future there, "The handwriting was on the wall."¹⁴ Joe applied to and was accepted to teach at seven universities in the US, settling in Cleveland. His and his wife, Sara, didn't marry until they were both in the US, but knew each other when they were children and would go to the same club in Cairo on Saturday nights after Shabbat.

Karaite Jews in the United States, Early Years

As much as Jews in general are a minority in the United States, Karaite Jews are a minority within that minority. The Daly City community is comprised of about 600 families, of whom about 200-250 remain somewhat active with the synagogue. As time goes by, a variety of factors make it difficult to continue practicing as Karaite Jews. As the older, more learned members of the community have died and the community has dispersed, skills have been lost. Living in America poses challenges to immigrant communities in general. Subsequent generations to the initial immigrants have moved farther and farther away from their origins because of the myriad competing priorities.

In the late 1950s, Jews from Egypt began immigrating to the United States, settling in various areas much like any other immigrant group. Currently there are several hundred Jews of

¹³ From phone conversation with Joe Haroun, 1/15/2015

¹⁴ From phone conversation with Joe Haroun, 1/15/2015

Egyptian Karaite descent and heritage living in the US and observing their customs to varying degrees.

Their Egyptian heritage wasn't an issue with regard to the mainstream Jewish community, but questions arose regarding their Karaite heritage and practice. Many in the Orthodox community refused to acknowledge Karaites as Jews; however, a 1984 *teshuva* of the Conservative movement established the Egyptian Karaites as Jews who were eligible for membership in their synagogues¹⁵. In 1984, Rabbi Laurence Skopitz of Rochester, NY (where my father-in-law and many of his relatives resided) asked the United Synagogues of America's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) three questions regarding the personal status and Jewish identity of Egyptian Karaites, and whether or not Karaites in the US and in Israel were to be treated differently. Written by Rabbi David A. Lincoln, the *teshuva* presented the historically conflicting opinions about the Jewish status of Karaites in general, including whether or not they could marry into the mainstream Rabbanite community, and concluded that the identity of Egyptian Karaites was not in question. The discussion about Eastern European Karaites, who appear to have separated from the Jewish community in the 18th and 19th centuries, is beyond the scope of this paper.

Many Karaite Jews who settled in the US, including my father-in-law and his brother, met and married women of Ashkenazi Jewish descent. Others married within the Karaite community, or came to the US already married. In order to connect with a larger Jewish community and to provide a Jewish education for their children, they joined mainstream Conservative and Reform synagogues. The only established Karaite community with its own synagogue is in Daly City, CA. Smaller communities began and still exist in the Rochester, Los Angeles, Providence and

¹⁵ See Exhibit A, Teshuva written by Rabbi David A Lincoln

New York City areas. Members of these communities socialize and get together for holidays and life cycle events, but aren't otherwise organized. There is a very small community (perhaps 6 or 7 households) in Albany, NY, which holds services in the home of one of its members.¹⁶

The History and Background of the Daly City Karaite Community

When an individual or family immigrates to another country, the tendency is to settle in an area where one has friends or family—or at the least—an acquaintance or introduction, and the Egyptian Karaite community in the San Francisco Bay area is no exception. Education has always been a priority in Judaism, and in Egypt, many Karaite women and most men pursued college degrees in various professions including engineering and education. The Bay area, which would eventually come to be called “Silicon Valley,” was already home to several engineering and technology companies, and the skill sets of many Egyptian Jews fit perfectly with their needs. Remy and Joe Pessah, who were in their final year of study at Cairo University when Joe was imprisoned, completed their education in San Francisco and were immediately employed.

Henry Mourad was born in 1945 in a middle class neighborhood in Cairo. With a degree in engineering from Cairo University, Henry founded his own telecommunications company in the San Francisco Bay area, which he ran for 15 years until the board of directors decided to look for a buyer. After a few years with the new owners, Henry retired to pursue other interests¹⁷. The KJA, (Karaite Jews of America) an organization of which he is currently president, was formally established as a nonprofit organization in May, 1983.

Over time, the community centered in and around the Bay area began to grow, and a new generation was growing up with one foot in the Karaite community, one in the mainstream US

¹⁶ I have attempted to reach the leader of this community without success.

¹⁷ <http://jimenaexperience.org/egypt/about/personal-stories-and-culture/mourad1/>

Jewish community, and both feet in American culture. Many families enrolled their children in Jewish day schools; others sent their children to public schools and then to a supplemental Hebrew school at a local synagogue, often Conservative. Through family activities, get-togethers, holiday observances and celebrations, Karaite families—such as the Pessahs, Mourads and Lichaas—instilled Karaite tradition and heritage as they prepared their children to live as Jews in their new world.

Professor Joel Beinin of Stanford University has written extensively about the Egyptian Jewish community, and his book, The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry, discusses the process of the organization of the Karaite Jews in the Bay Area. Not surprisingly, “when the Bay Area Karaites began to discuss what kind of institutions would best preserve their community and its identity, two opposing views surfaced.”¹⁸ More observant families favored a traditional synagogue similar to those in Egypt, while the more assimilated families “favored an educational center that would preserve and transmit the historical heritage of Karaite culture but would not obstruct the Karaites’ integration into the broader American Jewish community.”¹⁹

In May of 1983, Fred Lichaa, a computer programmer who had immigrated in 1968, arranged for the Karaite community to meet one Sabbath a month at Temple Sinai, a Reform congregation in Foster City, CA. On other Sabbaths, prayers were held in individual homes, providing the opportunity for the community to observe and celebrate Sabbaths—and festivals—together. Joe Pessah, in a 2007 interview in *The Forward*, spoke about the Karaite community’s acceptance by the mainstream Jewish community. “Once they saw the dedication of our people to learn—and really coming from a difficult environment—our brothers, the Rabbanites, had compassion on us.

¹⁸ p. 192

¹⁹ p. 192

And they helped us. They gave us a room in their synagogue, and then we prayed during Shabbat and the festivals. So it was ‘a big brother helping the younger brother.’²⁰”

“Mixed” Marriages

Marriage outside of one’s community has been a concern since ancient times; going at least back to Abraham, who sent his servant back to Haran to find a wife for his son Isaac from among his relatives, and Jacob, who married his cousins Leah and Rachel. Even when both partners share religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, marriage is a challenge—no two families have exactly the same experience. Maintaining traditions, practices and religious observances becomes even more difficult when spouses don’t have the same frame of reference to draw from. One might think that when two Jews (or Catholics, Methodists, etc.) marry, they agree about religious issues in the family, but this isn’t often the case. Differences in levels of observance, attendance at worship services, dietary restrictions and family customs all require negotiation.

There are approximately 30,000 Karaites worldwide. The majority live in Israel and comprise a substantial community there, making endogamous marriages much easier. In the same interview with *The Forward*, Joe Pessah noted the difficulties of marrying within the Karaite community, saying, “At the beginning, when we first came to America, there was almost no intermarriage, because that generation was strongly decided not to intermarry. And then, once the community started to send their children to schools, and they told their children to marry Karaites, and they looked around and there were no Karaites around, it was impossible to follow.”²¹ According to Shawn Lichaa, the last endogamous Karaite marriage in the US was 5 or 6 years ago.²²

²⁰ <http://forward.com/articles/11315/playing-the-part-of-rav-for-san-francisco/>

²¹ <http://forward.com/articles/11315/playing-the-part-of-rav-for-san-francisco/#ixzz3NxqL2nX7>

²² Via email with Shawn Lichaa, 12/2014

My father-in-law Zaki, and his brother Joe, who arrived in the US separately and as single men, both married women of (Rabbanite) Eastern European, Ashkenazi descent. They raised their children in mainstream Conservative synagogues and gave them an appreciation for their Karaite heritage at home, through food and family activities. One area where these traditions were evident was Passover. The word *hametz*, in addition to its usual translation of “leavened bread,” also means vinegar, which is made by the process of fermentation. Since leavening happens as a result of fermentation, most Karaites will not eat fermented foods or drink fermented beverages during Pesach. Yogurt, wine and vinegar-based foods such as salad dressings are out, rice, corn, peanuts and green beans are in. Roasted lamb is a popular *seder* meal, while most Ashkenazi Jews choose not to eat lamb then, and eschew rice and other *kitniyot*²³. My husband David recalls, “For Passover, my father would make a few specific dishes: carrot jam, coconut jam, and raisin wine. Our seders always included grilled lamb chops (preferably charcoal grilled), and my father would use lemon juice for a salad dressing. He would eat rice, which he preferred very well done, but not quite burned. I don’t remember all the details, but I think he also avoided yogurts and cheeses (even cottage cheese), as they were also fermented. I don’t recall the holiday being any shorter than the Rabbanites.”

Acculturation and Integrating Customs: Bar Mitzvah and Hanukkah

Bar Mitzvah

While having a bar mitzvah isn’t a traditional Karaite practice, Joe Haroun said that in Egypt there would be a group celebration, close to the festival of *Simchat Torah*, for boys around the age of 13²⁴. Here in the US, since their sons’ friends were celebrating bar mitzvah, the community made space for these ceremonies in its own synagogue. Shawn, along with Remy and

²³ *Kitniyot* is the name given to legumes and various grains that Ashkenazi Jews have traditionally not eaten on Passover for a variety of reasons. See http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Jewish_Holidays/Passover/At_Home/Food_and_the_Kitchen/Kitniyot.shtml for a perspective.

²⁴ From telephone conversation with Joe Haroun 1/5/2015

Joe Pessah's sons David and Jacob, received their formal training in chanting *Torah* and *Haftarah* from the rabbi in Hebrew School, and then celebrated their *b'nei mitzvah* by leading the entire prayer service (which according to Remy and Shawn was much more than what their friends did) at the Karaite synagogue. The concept of "bar mitzvah" doesn't have the same religious significance in the Karaite community, since individual responsibility for the *mitzvot* are incumbent on a person once he or she is old enough to understand and perform them. The "age of majority" in the Karaite community is situational, although many will point to the age of 20, the age of eligibility for military service according to the Torah²⁵, as a milestone.

Hanukkah

The "December Dilemma," which normally describes the tensions between celebrating Hanukkah and Christmas, takes on a different meaning for Karaite Jews living in America. Because the story of Hanukkah is post-biblical²⁶, it wasn't celebrated among Karaites. When the entire community is celebrating or abstaining, it's easy to conform, but again, living in the US presented new challenges, and Hanukkah was one of them. There's no question that the festival of Hanukkah is problematic; since neither the festival itself nor the events that inspired it are mentioned in *TaNaKh*, Karaites don't consider its observance to have been commanded by God. Some Karaite writings present vehemently polemical arguments for not observing the festival. Yochanan Zaqantov, writing about "Holidays Karaite Jews Shouldn't Celebrate"²⁷, quotes Rabbi Bradley Hirschfield, of CLAL²⁸, who notes that, "The Hanukkah menorah is Zoroastrian."²⁹ While Zaqantov doesn't mention it in his article, one might argue that lighting Hanukkah candles

²⁵ Exodus 30:14 and other places

²⁶ The two books of Maccabees are part of the Apocrypha in the Catholic canon, but not part of the *TaNaKh*

²⁷ http://www.karaitejudaism.org/talks/Should_Karaites_do_holidays-Part_2.htm

²⁸ The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership; Rabbi Hirschfield is also co-founder and Executive Editor of *thewisdomdaily.com*

²⁹ <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Judaism/2005/12/How-To-Solve-The-December-Dilemma.aspx?p=2#>

is copying the practices of another community, which the Torah prohibits³⁰. This also comes into play when Rabbinic Jews see Hanukkah as a substitute for Christmas, in order to make their children feel better about missing out on a major holiday in the secular world.

On the other hand, one can argue, as Remy Pessah does, that it's okay to celebrate Hanukkah because of the changes that happen living in the US, "We came to a decision that as long as it's not against the Torah and is promoting the learning, I don't see anything wrong."³¹ In her family, they would light the Hanukkah candles but omit the blessing that says, *asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel chanuka*, that God "sanctified us with his commandments and commanded us to kindle the Hanukkah lights."

Brenda Gazzar, ethnic news reporter for the *LA Times*, shared a memory of Hanukkah in her home growing up. "My parents celebrated [Hanukkah] in our house because they didn't want my sister and I to feel left out while our friends were opening their Christmas presents and decorating their tree." The celebration included lighting the candles, probably with blessings they learned in Hebrew School, eating *latkes* her mother made, chocolate *gelt*, singing songs, playing *dreidel* and opening gifts each night. Brenda reminisced, "We grew up in a small desert town in California where nearly all of our friends were Christian and there were no Karaites. It did have a tiny but wonderful Jewish community that helped instill in us a strong Jewish identity and showered us with gifts for all the Jewish holidays, including Hanukkah."³²

³⁰ Leviticus 18:3. The Torah usually speaks of not copying practices in the context of sexual immorality or idol worship, but I believe it may come into play here.

³¹ From telephone conversation on 1/5/2015 and email on 2/15/2015, Remy Pessah

³² Via email with Brenda Gazzar on 2/14/2015

Kashrut and Dietary Laws

The laws of kashrut are another clear example of the differences between the Karaite approach to the *TaNakh* and the Rabbanite approach.

As an example, the Torah commands three times, *lo t'vashel gedi b'halev imo*, “Do not boil the kid in its mother’s milk.”³³ Over many years and much rabbinic discussion, this prohibition became “don’t mix milk and meat,” and ultimately led to the need for separate sets of dishes, utensils and cookware, and in some cases, dairy and meat appliances and kitchens. This is an example of the rabbinic concept of “building a fence around the Torah”³⁴ in order to ensure that one wouldn’t inadvertently violate a commandment. Karaites take the *peshat*, or “literal” meaning of the commandment to mean that only boiling of a kid in its own mother’s milk is prohibited, not the eating milk and meat together, or serving them at the same meal.

Some Karaites point to Genesis 17:7-8, where Abraham appears to be serving both milk and meat to his three visitors, verses that rabbinic sages have grappled with for centuries. Joseph Bendah, a Karaite Jew living in the San Diego, CA area, spoke to a group at Temple Emanu-El, and noted that, “...nowhere in the Torah is it subsequently stated that Abraham erred in his menu choices.”³⁵ While he didn’t agree that these verses actually served as a proof-text to support the Karaite view, Shawn Lichaa said, “There is a view in Karaite Judaism that when the narrative portions of the Tanakh describe an event and do not state disapproval that we (generally, but not always) can assume it is okay.”³⁶ He and Tomer Mangoubi³⁷ both mentioned that the Patriarchs probably didn’t keep all of the *mitzvot* before the Revelation at Sinai, about which Tomer

³³ Exodus 23:19, 35:26 and Deuteronomy 14:21

³⁴ Pirkei Avot 1:1

³⁵ <http://www.sdjewishworld.com/2014/02/08/reform-karaite-dialogue-buffet-lunch/>

³⁶ Via email with Shawn Lichaa, 3/2015

³⁷ See page 32 for more information about Tomer Mangoubi and his work with *Mikdash Me'at*

commented, “The fact that some of the *mitzvot* were not kept until the giving of the Torah is a fundamental exegetical principle for many Karaite sages. They view it as illogical that these *mitzvot* could have been kept before they were given.”³⁸

Not all Karaites “keep kosher,” but for those who do follow the Karaite dietary laws, there are differences of opinion. Some Karaites will eat a cheeseburger or beef stroganoff, others will mix meat and dairy as long as they are from different animals (e.g., beef and goat cheese), and others will only mix poultry and dairy.

There are also differences in the procedure for properly slaughtering an animal; Maimonides warned against accepting meat slaughtered by a Karaite *shochet* (person trained in ritual slaughter), although today, many Karaites in Israel will not eat rabbinically slaughtered meat. As there are currently only two people in the US trained in Karaite slaughter, most Karaites here will accept rabbinically slaughtered meat as kosher.

The Jewish Calendar and Festivals

Earlier I wrote about differences between Karaites and Rabbanites with respect to Hanukkah, but an even larger issue comes up with respect to the calendar as a whole. Both communities follow a lunar calendar that is adjusted, through a system of leap years, to more closely correspond to the solar calendar, ensuring that festivals will fall during their appropriate seasons. *Sukkot* will always be in autumn, and Passover and *Shavuot* will fall seven weeks apart in the spring.

While most Jews today think of *Rosh Hashanah* as “The Jewish New Year,” the Biblical year actually begins with the first New Moon after the barley in Israel reaches the stage in its ripeness called *aviv*. In modern Hebrew *aviv* means “Spring,” and is the time when God brought the

³⁸ From telephone conversation 2/16/2015

Israelites out from slavery in Egypt, as written in Exodus 23:15 and 34:18, “You will keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread; seven days you will eat unleavened bread, as I have commanded you, at the time of the month of the *aviv*, because in it you went out of Egypt.” *Aviv* refers to the ripening of the barley, based on Exodus 9:31-32, which describes the devastation caused by the plague of hail: “And the flax and the barley were smitten, because the barley was *aviv*...” meaning that it was brittle—as opposed to the wheat—which was still flexible and able to withstand the hail.

Beginning in ancient Israel and even after the advent of astronomical calculations, both Rabbanite and Karaite Jews relied on the observation of the *aviv* and the new moon sightings to set the proper times for the festivals, as outlined in Leviticus 23. Once the calendar became standardized, the empirical observations became less important and fixed dates were set. As a result, the Rabbinic calendar does not always correspond exactly to new moon sightings in Israel. In a blog post about the calendar, Shawn Lichaa wrote “One of my most vivid childhood memories comes from elementary school, when I was explaining to my friends and teachers why I would be at school on “*Yom Kippur*” and how my (*i.e.*, the Karaite/biblical) *Yom Kippur* fell on a different day.”³⁹

Because Leviticus 23:4 commands us to observe holidays at their correct time, this is problematic for both Rabbinic and Karaite Jews; and in some years, the rabbinic calendar is adjusted. For example, Rosh Hashanah can never begin on a Saturday, Tuesday or Thursday night. This guarantees that Yom Kippur (also called *Shabbat Shabbaton* “The Sabbath of Sabbaths”) will not fall on a Thursday night/Friday or Saturday night/Sunday, which would produce two consecutive days of Sabbath restrictions, when preparing food and burying the dead

³⁹ <http://abluethread.com/2013/01/28/this-above-all-to-thine-own-self-be-true/>

is prohibited⁴⁰. If Rosh Hashanah began on a Saturday night/Sunday, *Hoshanah Rabbah*—when the willows of the *lulav* are beaten—would fall on Shabbat, preventing the proper celebration of that day.⁴¹ If the *molad*, the newly visible moon⁴², would fall on one of those days, the first day of the month of *Tishrei*, meaning Rosh Hashanah, would be postponed by one day.

The Karaite calendar historically wasn't adjusted, citing Leviticus 23:4 which commands, "These are the set times of the Lord, the sacred occasions, which you shall celebrate each at its appointed time:"⁴³ Karaites don't celebrate *Hoshanah Rabbah*, since its observance isn't mentioned in *TaNakh*, and if *Yom Kippur* and *Shabbat* are on consecutive days, food is simply prepared ahead of time. Unlike Rabbanites, who will keep food warm on a *blech* (a large, flat piece of metal covering a stovetop to keep food warm) or an oven turned on beforehand, Karaites will only eat cold food on Shabbat, or food that has been kept warm in a Thermos® type of container. In both communities, one may cook food on a festival to be consumed the same day.⁴⁴

When part of the Jewish community is out of sync with another, it can create confusion, as Shawn Lichaa noted earlier regarding his community's observance of *Yom Kippur*, which fell on a different day than the rabbinic Jewish community.⁴⁵ Karaites living in a community with members in reasonably close proximity, such as in around the Daly City area, are able to celebrate festivals and worship together. However, for the majority of the Karaites in the US, and elsewhere outside of Israel, there is an added layer of complexity. David Rosch lives in Switzerland, and affiliated with Karaite Judaism two years ago, several years after converting to Judaism. He notes that the lack of a Karaite community in his area makes observances very

⁴⁰ This is problematic for two reasons; first, *k'vod ha met*—honoring the dead—means burying as soon as possible after death. The second is that a corpse left unburied would cause sanitary issues if left too long.

⁴¹ *Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, Isaac Klein (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America 1992), p. 259

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ Etz Hayim Chumash, JPS translation

⁴⁴ See Exodus 12:16

⁴⁵ See page 20

difficult. “There are no places of worship, no regular meetings, face-to-face.” However, “There are some Karaite families in Switzerland, around 3 hours from me. We celebrate *Pesach* together, stay in touch over email.” While David said that he hasn’t encountered much in the way of negative attitudes from Rabbinic Jews, the differences in *kashrut*, holidays, and other observances do make it more difficult to live in community.⁴⁶

For the past century or so, most Karaite communities have adopted the calculated Rabbinic calendar rather than relying on local moon sightings and the *aviv*. At some point in the 1990s, the Daly City community decided to accept the Rabbinic calendar for celebrating all of their festivals, with the exception of *Shavuot*, which is always on a Sunday⁴⁷. As Tomer Mangoubi writes in *Mikdash Me’at*,⁴⁸ “by the 20th century the use of the *aviv* amongst Karaites fell into disuse even in Egypt. In Israel today, Egyptian Karaites look for the *aviv* but generally do not set their month according to it. The potential of being a month off the rest of the Israeli population is perceived as too radical or inconvenient by much of the Karaite community.”⁴⁹

Two festivals for which the calendar still differs are *Purim* and *Shavuot*.

Purim

In 5774 (i.e. in the Western year 2014), which was a Jewish leap year, the Karaites celebrated a full month earlier than their Rabbanite counterparts. During a leap year both calendars add a 13th month to keep the festivals in the proper seasons. The Rabbinic custom is to move *Purim* into the 13th month, called *Adar II*, because “The Talmud suggests that since Purim and Passover both

⁴⁶ Via email 2/18/2015

⁴⁷ See the discussion of Shavuot below

⁴⁸ An abridged version of *Aderet Eliahu*, translated into English, see p.32. Drafts are available online at <http://www.karaites.org/reading-room.html>

⁴⁹ http://www.karaites.org/uploads/7/4/1/3/7413835/mikdash_meat_section_2_sanctifying_the_month.pdf, p. 16

celebrate the deliverance of Israel, they should occur close to one another.”⁵⁰ The Karaites observe *Purim* in *Adar I*, the 12th month, in accordance with Esther 9:1, which says that the events of *Purim* occurred in the “12th month, which is *Adar*.”⁵¹ Participants in Karaite *Purim* festivities light candles following Esther 8:16, “The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor.”

Shavuot

One calendrical issue which clearly illustrates a difference between the Karaite and Rabbanite interpretations of Torah is the timing of *Shavuot*. Leviticus 23:15 commands the Israelites to begin counting the 49 days of the *omer* from “the day after the Sabbath.” Rabbinic Jews interpret “the Sabbath” as the *Pesach* festival, and begin counting on the evening of the second day.⁵² The Karaites interpret “the day after the Sabbath” literally, and begin counting the *omer* on the first Sunday after the first day of Passover, which means that *Shavuot* is always observed on Sunday. In 2014, *Shavuot* was observed on June 4 (and June 5 outside of Israel) in the Rabbanite community and on Sunday, June 8 in the Karaite community.

Rosh Hashanah/Yom Teruah

According to Rabbi/Hakham Nehemia Gordon, the “first day of the seventh month” (Lev. 23:24) became *Rosh Hashanah*—the Jewish New Year – as a result of Babylonian pagan influences.⁵³ As mentioned earlier, the biblical name for this day is *Yom Teruah*, interpreted by Karaites as “Day of Shouting,” as in “shouting in prayer.” This understanding is consistent with the usage of the word *teru’ah* in Joshua 6:5 in which the people are told to “shout a great shout.” Because the Torah specifically commands us to sound – *teru’ah* – the *shofar* on *Yom Kippur* to announce the

⁵⁰ Guide to Jewish Religious Practice, Isaac Klein p. 237

⁵¹ <http://www.karaites.org/purim.html>

⁵² See Etz Hayim *Humash* for an explanation of this interpretation, p. 726

⁵³ <http://www.nehemiaswall.com/yom-teruah-day-shouting-became-rosh-hashanah>

Jubilee year (Lev. 25:9), the Rabbinic interpretation that *Yom Teru'ah* is intended to be celebrated by the sound of the *shofar*, does make sense. However, the Karaites consider a *shofar* a musical instrument, and consider it *melakhah* – forbidden work – to blow the *shofar* on the holiday. There is no question that both Rabbanite and Karaite Jews consider this day to be a festival, but its observances, and even the tone of the day and liturgy, differ. Following mainstream Rabbanite custom, *Rosh Hashanah* is a less-than-festive day characterized by hours in an unusually full synagogue, unfamiliar liturgy, and long appeals and sermons. Part of the goal of this day is to usher in the “Ten Days of Repentance” leading up to *Yom Kippur*, when we will (God willing) be sealed in the Book of Life for a good year.

For Karaites as well, *Yom Teruah* is a day of prayer and rest, but “It is a joyous holy day and Karaites took full advantage of that. It was the day to pay parents and grandparents a visit, a day to have parties and celebrations.”⁵⁴ The shouting to God in prayer on this day also begins the process of *teshuvah*—repentance that will culminate on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, which is observed similarly in both communities.

Passover

Another area in which Karaites in America maintain distinctive traditions is Passover. The word *hametz*, in addition to its usual translation of “leavened bread,” also means vinegar, which is made by the process of fermentation. Since leavening happens as a result of fermentation, most Karaites will not eat fermented foods or drink fermented beverages during Pesach. Yogurt, wine and vinegar-based foods such as salad dressings are out, rice, corn, peanuts and green beans are in. Roasted lamb is a popular *seder* meal, while most Ashkenazi Jews choose not to eat lamb

⁵⁴ <http://www.karaites.org/history.html#holy>

then, and eschew rice and other *kitniyot*⁵⁵. My husband David recalls, “For Passover, my father would make a few specific dishes: carrot jam, coconut jam, and raisin wine. Our seders always included grilled lamb chops (preferably charcoal grilled), and my father would use lemon juice for a salad dressing. He would eat rice, which he preferred very well done, but not quite burned. I don’t remember all the details, but I think he also avoided yogurts and cheeses (even cottage cheese), as they were also fermented. I don’t recall the holiday being any shorter than the Rabbanites.”

Joining the Karaite Community and Conversion

Like Rabbinic Jews, Karaites have never actively sought out converts, whether out of fear of persecution or a desire to maintain a more homogenous community, or a lack of desire to proselytize. While there was always movement in and out of the Israelite/Jewish community, beginning in Talmudic times the prevailing attitude was to discourage proselytizing, since in both Christian- and Moslem-ruled countries, converting to Judaism was illegal and posed a danger not only for the convert, but also for the entire Jewish community. For a variety of reasons, according to Joe Haroun, “For centuries the Karaites didn’t accept converts; they were an insular community, afraid of foreign influence. Now we bring them over as long as they come with the (proper) soul and the mind-set. Just like any converts in our (rabbinic) synagogue, they’re tenacious about keeping commandments.”⁵⁶

On August 1, 2007, 14 individuals (10 adults and four minors) from varied backgrounds and areas of the US and Canada participated in the first known Karaite conversion ceremony in over 500 years, the last being in 1465, when a group of Spanish Christians became Karaite Jews in a

⁵⁵ *Kitniyot* is the name given to legumes and various grains that Ashkenazi Jews have traditionally not eaten on Passover for a variety of reasons. See http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Jewish_Holidays/Passover/At_Home/Food_and_the_Kitchen/Kitniyot.shtml for a perspective.

⁵⁶ From telephone conversation 2/2015

Cairo synagogue. In an article about the conversion ceremony on jWeekly.com, a San Francisco area e-newsletter, the writer noted that for centuries, “Even other Jews were not entirely welcome (to join the Karaite community). One had to be born into a Karaite family to be a Karaite Jew. But 15 years ago, the Karaite Council of Sages in Israel finally decreed a change, welcoming other Jews.”⁵⁷ In 2001 the council expanded that change to include gentiles who want to join the Karaite Jewish community, which Hakham Nehemia Gordon sees as a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. “‘Isaiah speaks of gentiles brought in by God,’ he said, said, looking on proudly at the converts. This is a fulfillment for gentiles to embrace ‘Kara.’”⁵⁸

Those converting swore allegiance to Karaite Judaism and recited the same oath that the biblical Ruth took when she insisted on following her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Judea⁵⁹. Following the ceremony, the four newly-converted couples exchanged marriage vows before Rav Moshe Firrouz, (Chief Hakham of the Karaite Community), who, according to jWeekly.com, “chanted benedictions with musical trope that would not sound out of place in a Cairo shuk.”⁶⁰

Acting Rav Joe Pessah, who helped preside over the conversion ceremony said, “For a community accustomed to losing members, this will reverse the trend. Karaites had built around themselves a Great Wall of China. We may differ [with other Jews], but we are one people. Choosing to be a Jew is the most brave statement we can make.”⁶¹

In the face of rising rates of intermarriage between Karaite and Rabbanite Jews, as well as interfaith marriages, the conversion of non-Jews into the Karaite community and the adoption of

⁵⁷ <http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/33048/a-conversion-for-the-ages/>

⁵⁸ *ibid*

⁵⁹ Ruth, 1:16

⁶⁰ *ibid*, shuk is the Arabic word for “market.”

⁶¹ <http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/33048/a-conversion-for-the-ages/>

Karaite customs, beliefs and teachings by Rabbanite Jews are what Shawn Lichaa sees as the major area of growth for the community.

Personal Stories: Joining Karaite Judaism

James Walker, who converted to Karaite Judaism in 2013 along with his wife, son and daughter, grew up in an African-American evangelical Christian home in Charlotte, North Carolina. “My upbringing highly valued God’s word and being able to have a biblical way of life, that’s a strong virtue,” he said in a phone interview, “And the experiences that led me in the direction of the Torah in general and eventually Karaite Judaism, came when I was about 16. I had a friend who was an African American Jehovah’s Witness, and we would study together.” James wanted to “be as biblical a Christian as I could,” and began exploring his friend’s belief system as well as other religious groups that he saw as “marginal,” a task made relatively easy by the Internet.

He began questioning what he had been taught, and searching for a way to live a more biblical life. James’ search led him to Messianic Judaism, which he thinks has the effect of “back-firing.” Instead of “converting Jews to Christianity, it was introducing Protestants to Judaism.... why you should be interested in Israel.... you realize Judaism is far more rich.”

His realization that different translations of the bible present different perspectives led him to learning Hebrew, and beginning with primers from a friend who tutored bar mitzvah students, he taught himself well enough to pass out of the first semester of biblical Hebrew in college. It was then that he began to question the New Testament, noting that in the Greek (which he also taught himself) almost every verse had a footnote regarding its interpretation. He was also bothered by the idea that the Christian Bible contradicted the Torah. Eventually, he decided that the *TaNaKh* is the true scripture, and began to explore Judaism through that lens. Through the Internet he

found the writings of Hakham Nehemiah Gordon, the son of a Chicago area Orthodox rabbi who had adopted Karaite practice as a youth.

One attraction for James to Karaite Judaism was the absence of a central organization. He said, “unless you sign up for the central organization you’re missing out on the truth. I saw it as a distraction.” James and his family currently worship at a Black Israelite congregation in Charlotte and where they spend the day on *Shabbat*. Friday evenings are spent at home with a Shabbat dinner and quiet family time that might include readings from *TaNakh* or Jewish-themed books. James speaks Hebrew to his children at home, and they “understand we are Jews, we are Israelites.” Because he has an analytic background, raising his children with the ability to think critically, to be able to evaluate what they’re told, is a priority, and James feels this is consistent with the Karaite approach to interpreting *Torah* and the *mitzvot*.

By day, James is a computer programmer. His literacy with Hebrew, as well as Arabic, are invaluable in helping to make Karaite texts more accessible to English speakers, and he is working closely with Shawn Lichaa and others to reopen the KJU’s educational programs.⁶² James has also started a direct translation of the commentary of the 12th century Karaite sage Jacob ben Reuven, who wrote a commentary on Ahasueros, and Shawn said he expects that it will be completed and available for distribution before next Purim (5776/2016)⁶³

This past November, James was one of 12 finalists for the North American Tanakh Competition. He was the only convert, the only African American and the only Karaite to compete. The rest of

⁶² Via phone conversations and emails with James Walker, 2/2015

⁶³ via email with Shawn Lichaa 4/26/2015

the competitors had Orthodox Jewish upbringings. He told Shawn that he was very welcomed, although one person had a tough time with the fact that he was a Karaite.⁶⁴

Hakham Meir Rekhavi's journey to Karaite Judaism was "a slow process; becoming rather than turning." Raised in what he joked was "hypocritical orthodox" home, "we walked to *shul* on Shabbat, if it was raining you drove and parked three streets away," he went to live in Israel in 1979. Meir studied in different Sephardic *yeshivot*, and while comparing the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds and seeing the contradictions, started questioning what he was learning.

The idea of the Sages contradicting each other on what he believed was God's word, didn't make sense to him. He started studying the contradictions in both the *Mishnah* and *Gemara*, and over time came to the conclusion "you couldn't have outright contradictions and have them be Divine." He said, I classified myself as a "Mishnaic Pharisee," but after time the *Mishnah* didn't fit right, I started dropping it and going more to Torah itself."

Meir decided to check out the Karaite shul in the Old City of Jerusalem, near where he was studying. "The first thing was when I walked in and saw how they pray on their knees, prayed like the prophets, (it) showed a biblical path." He started going to the synagogue more often, feeling as though they were preserving "more of the Torah way in the time of the prophets." He began accepting more of the Karaite teachings over the course of a few years, "until one day I said, 'I'm Karaite.'"

⁶⁴ Shawn blogged about this here: <http://abluethread.com/2015/01/21/karaite-reaches-north-american-finals-tanakh-competition/>

Meir spoke about his internal struggle, feeling as though he was rejecting the Judaism he had grown up with. One example he gave was *tefillin*, which he began to wear as he approached bar mitzvah age in his Orthodox day school in London. Karaites don't wear *tefillin*, because they don't interpret, "and you shall keep them for a sign upon your hand and for frontlets between your eyes"⁶⁵ as pertaining to physical objects. When he became a Karaite and stopped laying *tefillin*, he said, "It was a big tear... everything I had been brainwashed... it was like rejecting your Judaism."

Meir met and married his wife in Israel, and she agreed to adopt Karaite practice. Over time she came to appreciate it for itself, much like many gentiles who either convert to marry a Rabbanite Jew or agree to raise their children as Jews, and become more committed to observance than the Jewish partner. They have three children, and in 1983 returned to London, where they are the only Karaite family, a detriment for their children. In two years, when the youngest graduates from high school, they plan to return to Israel.

When asked what he found compelling about Karaite Judaism, he said, "The essence of Karaite Judaism is you are your own man, you must think for yourself, because at the end of the day it is you that must stand before the Divine, you who must justify your life and what you stood for."

Meir is presently Chancellor of the Karaite Jewish University, an online program that is designed to teach gentiles and Rabbanite Jews about Karaite Judaism both to educate others about Karaite Judaism, and to facilitate a path to conversion.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Deuteronomy 6:8

⁶⁶ Via telephone conversation and emails with Hakham Meir Rekhavi, 3/2015

David Rosch of Switzerland was raised in a secular Christian home, and began exploring Judaism in his teens; he said the impetus was visiting the Great Synagogue in Florence, Italy and feeling immediately at home. After living as a Rabbanite Jew for several years, he began to explore Karaite Judaism with the help of the Internet and was attracted because “Karaite Judaism puts a huge emphasis on one’s own interpretation and reading and understanding of the *TaNakh*. It is the responsibility of yourself, and even (your) obligation to study and to make sure that you understand correctly and live life accordingly and not rely on somebody else.”

Another reason why David embraces Karaite Judaism is a rejection of the rabbinic reliance on the “Oral Law,” which he sees as compilation of opinions by different people through different periods of time, and which contain conflicting interpretations. He is frustrated by Jews who only quote the ‘oral laws’ and gave the ancient Rabbis what he calls “semi-idol status.” In his travels, David has encountered many Rabbinite Jews whom he feels “rely heavily on the views and opinions of their Rabbis, and I think this goes contrary to what is written in the Torah.”

David feels that we live in a society where people have difficulty accepting responsibility for their own mistakes; it’s much easier to blame somebody else or give up completely, and he noted that this is also true in business, “Why are there so many consulting companies around nowadays?” That said, he commented that, “There are many Rabbinite Jews who are, in their attitude, practice and thinking, very close to Karaite Judaism. So, we need to make sure that they know about us and enable them to study with us. And here the Internet says ‘hello’. Not only does it enable us to teach them about us but it also enables us to stay in touch with each other, hold talks and discussions.”

Following university in the UK, David, now 31, joined his family business and also owns his own art gallery. He travels to Israel as often as he can to meet up with Karaite Jews and visit the synagogues there.⁶⁷

Etay Nir, the son of a Karaite mother and Israeli Rabbanite father, was raised as a secular Jew on a *kibbutz* near the Jordanian border and spent 13 years in the Israeli military before moving to the US. Much of his mother's family, who came from Romania, perished in the Holocaust, and she herself was born in the Transnistria camp towards the end of the war. "Growing up," Etay said, "I knew there were differences between the rabbinical and Karaite movements that spanned all the way from philosophy, date keeping, food and holiday observances. The sad part was that I never went too deep trying to better understand the way and how there were differences." There were some on the *kibbutz* who didn't consider Etay "a real Jew" because his mother was (mistakenly) called a Samaritan (often confused with Karaite), but for the most part, but given the secular socialist nature of the *kibbutz*, religion wasn't a big issue. When asked why he chose to embrace the Karaite practices of his mother's family, Etay said, "For me, evaluating the two and knowing the two, the Karaite way seems the most natural choice for me and in my opinion the true way, it was not even a difficult choice or a question – that I knew since I was a kid." When he told his father of his decision, he said, "he told me he was surprised I didn't do that years ago."

Etay now lives in Park City, Utah with his wife and four year old daughter. He calls himself a "white hat hacker," and his day job is catching hackers (working with internet security). The lack

⁶⁷ Via emails with David Rosch, 2/2015-3/2015

of a Jewish community, let alone a Karaite community, does present its challenges, and Etay hopes in the future to become more involved with the synagogue in Daly City. For now he is in touch with Hakham Moshe Firrouz and other Karaites in Israel and observes at home.⁶⁸

The Next Generation

Educating the children in one's community is essential to its continuity, and the farther one gets from his or her immigrant roots, the more difficult that becomes. The past 50 years have seen tremendous changes in American family life, and the impact of technology can't be underestimated. Established synagogues and churches are finding it difficult to compete with the myriad sports and other activities children are involved with today, and as families are busier, they have less time to educate their children in their faith and culture. This is especially true in liberal Jewish movements where many of today's parents (and perhaps grandparents) were disenfranchised by their religious school experiences, or grew up in secular Jewish homes. The Egyptian Karaite families who came to the United States had an even more difficult task, since many of their practices and observances differed from the Rabbanite community, and from what was being taught in their local synagogue's Hebrew school.

When Remy Pessah was asked how the Daly City community is educating its children, she replied, "We invite rabbis from Israel, and lately what we have been doing—and it has been very successful—is inviting young rabbis, who can really relate very much to the younger generation. Among them we had quite a few interesting learned men who came and stayed at the synagogue for 6 months or so, and they talked to the new generation, and I saw the enthusiasm of the children. A couple of weeks ago we had a *Shabbat* for children, and people came with their children, parents, grandparents. It was such a rejuvenating event, seeing the children being

⁶⁸ Via telephone conversations, emails and Facebook messages with Etay Nir, 2/2015

enthusiastic. We did a shorter version of the service, read from the Torah, and invited the children to do some of the reading.”⁶⁹

Shawn Lichaa has devoted many years to thinking about how to keep the community’s children engaged, and it has taken on new importance since the birth of his son Reuven Dov this past January. One of the reasons Shawn is blogging less (abluehread.com) is because all *kiruv*⁷⁰ starts at home, so he has begun working on programs to teach the young kids in the community. One of his goals is “Jewish history with a Karaite feel,” which includes teaching Karaite prayers, offering cooking classes to make traditional foods such as the large *hamentashen* eaten on Purim, and Karaite *matzah*.⁷¹

In 2014, Eli Shmuel, a member of the Karaite community in Israel, spent several months in the US reaching out to members of the Karaite community as well as to those who are not fully involved, both those of Karaite descent and those who have joined the community. Eli’s time spent in the Bay area so excited two of the young boys in the congregation that they are continuing to study with Shawn on a weekly basis.

As far as preserving Karaism and passing traditions to future generations, Henry Mourad said, “our work is still in its infancy. Our biggest obstacle is with the Community being scattered across the U.S. Only Karaites in the San Francisco Bay Area are truly reaping the benefit of our programs. Most other Karaites join Rabbanites Synagogues and teach their children Hebrew to initiate a Bar or Bat Mitzvah.” Henry sent his two daughters to a Rabbanite Hebrew school and

⁶⁹ Via email with Remy Pessah 1/5/2015

⁷⁰ *Kiruv* literally means “closeness.” The intent, in this context, is one of creating community, inclusion, bringing others close.

⁷¹ Shawn and two of his students created this video with a recipe for Karaite matza: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NR3mhY-sFRk>

prepared them for Bat Mitzvah, but once the Karaite synagogue was established, “I returned back to my roots.”⁷²

Children in education programs in Daly City learn Hebrew and the essence to the traditional Karaite liturgy. For the adults, informal seminars are conducted about Karaism, its origin, and how the movement flourished. “We emphasize our glory days and the need to pave the road to our former success.” However, the community understood that prayer alone was not enough to bring them together. “Our children must experience the joy of celebrating the Holidays through appropriate rites with big festivities. As much as possible we try to make them feel wanted by organizing fun and games tailored for children.”⁷³

Information and Education for the Masses

Education about Karaism takes two forms; one is the passing down of the heritage and traditions to future generations descended from the (mostly) Egyptian Karaites who are living in the US, and the other is providing education about Karaite Judaism to interested individuals of other communities, Jewish and gentile.

Shawn Lichaa, son of Fred and Jacqueline Pessah Lichaa, is co-author of As It Is Written: A Brief Case for Karaite Judaism, which offers a basic introduction to Karaite interpretation of *TaNakh*, as well as history, theology and philosophy. As a primary contact for individuals interested in learning more about Karaite Judaism through the KJA, has worked tirelessly, along with his job as an attorney and now a new father, to educate people about Karaite Judaism and to keep the practice alive.

⁷² Via email with Henry Mourad, 2/25/2015

⁷³ Via email with Henry Mourad, 2/25/2015

Shawn's interest in learning more about his Karaite heritage and practices was sparked during his freshman year in college. His roommate was planning a speaker from Jews for Judaism, and a footnote in the pamphlet said something to the effect of, "Christian missionaries accused rabbis of making up laws, which isn't true." The feeling that it was also attacking Karaites reignited his desire to learn more about his own tradition and customs, but not to the exclusion of the rabbinic tradition he had studied previously. In fact, he even taught in the Hebrew and Sunday schools at a Conservative synagogue in Del Mar, California during college. While his initial perspective regarding Jewish learning was to validate the Karaite approach, he said, "It's better to study Judaism, and if you find the Karaite way is better, great. I stopped trying to prove myself."⁷⁴

Shawn has spoken extensively about Karaite Judaism and in addition to his blog, created several videos. His most recent video, produced with two of his young students, demonstrates how to make Karaite *matzah*.⁷⁵ While it wasn't "Moses' secret recipe," it does incorporate coriander and oil to reflect the description of the manna in Numbers 11:7-8, that it the manna was like coriander, and when it was made into cakes, it tasted like rich oil.⁷⁶ In his blog post about the video, Shawn quoted from Mourad El Kodsi's book, The Karaite Jews of Egypt, saying that, "Karaite *matzah* was so good that the Rabbanites of Egypt used to purchase some."

The Internet has made the world a much smaller place, making it much easier for interested individuals to learn about Karaite Judaism. In addition to Shawn's blog, "A Blue Thread," Hakham Nehemia Gordon maintains "Nehemia's Wall." "Karaites.org" is the official website of the Karaite Jews of America. The website "Karaite-Korner" was developed by Gordon and

⁷⁴ From telephone conversation with Shawn Lichaa on 12/2/2014

⁷⁵ See the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NR3mhY-sFRk>

⁷⁶ Numbers 11:7-8

Hakham Meir Rekhavi.⁷⁷ Several groups on Facebook are dedicated to Karaites, New Moon and *Aviv* sightings, genealogy and other topics of interest, and Karaites in Israel and other countries also have websites. When visiting various websites and blogs, it's important to remember that they may only present the opinion of one person, and the Karaite "motto" of "Search the scriptures well and do not rely on anyone's opinion,"⁷⁸ can be applied to the Internet as well; sources need to be checked.

To help present reliable information and educate interested individuals, the Karaite Jewish University (KJU) was formed in 2005. For several people, the educational programs and resources, comprising a year-long course, facilitated their path to conversion into the Karaite community. According to KJU Chancellor Hakham Meir Rekhavi, the US program is on hiatus, but the Latin American division is still running a class.

For centuries, Karaite Judaism flourished, and at their height in the Middle Ages, Karaites represented approximately 40% of the world's Jews. However, "In the Middle Ages, all [the Karaites] did was mourn the destruction (of the Temple). There was no real effort to reach into people's souls," Because of this, Shawn goes out of his way to give the most uplifting and *TaNakh*-based message possible when speaking and writing. He noted that there are Karaite versions of "Rebbe stories," that are trying to touch people's souls, saying, "If they don't see it in their guts, they're never going to see it in the book."⁷⁹

Shawn said he sees many people leaving the Jewish world—partly because they don't have a meaningful Jewish experience—and that Karaite Judaism can provide that, perhaps with a

⁷⁷ While it doesn't note this on the site, *karaites-korner* began as the site for the World Movement for Karaite Judaism, which Shawn Lichaa said in a 4/26/15 email that the organization may not be active at this time.

⁷⁸ Lichaa, Gordon, Rekhavi, *As It Is Written A Brief Case for Karaite Judaism*, p. 7

⁷⁹ From phone conversation with Shawn Lichaa on 12/2/2014

different approach to text, community and leadership. He pointed to the explosion of independent *minyanim*⁸⁰, which is indicative of a larger trend in the Jewish community; one in which a central organization or charismatic leader isn't setting the agenda for everyone.

James Walker said he sees Karaism as another way to be Jewish, "and a way to reach Jews who have been disaffected by the Judaism of their youth and don't feel challenged."⁸¹ My husband, David, who was raised mostly with Ashkenazi practice but with a variety of Karaite customs and traditions mixed in, said, "In many ways, the Karaite practice makes sense to me. I don't believe that Judaism is designed to be so difficult to practice, and the 'fence' around the Torah, adding rules and edicts, I find to be oppressive."

Karaite Judaism offers a pluralistic approach to observing the commandments by empowering the individual to apply logic and reason, along with the use of accepted exegetical methods of interpreting the text, to determine his or her observance. Rather than creating anarchy, this approach creates a community that agrees on certain accepted practices, and tolerates various levels of deviation. To return to the example of eating meat and dairy together, the synagogue community may decide that only poultry and dairy may be mixed at communal meals. An individual who interprets the commandment to not "boil the kid in its mother's milk" may be comfortable with a beef burger with cow's milk cheese at home, but wouldn't attempt to serve it at the synagogue. The leadership isn't dictating personal practice.

Karaite Writings in English

Learning about the laws and precepts that define a religious community can be daunting.

Rabbinic Jews have a plethora of extra-biblical *halakhic* sources to consult dating back more

⁸⁰ A *minyan* is a group of 10 Jewish adults (men in the Orthodox communities) which is required to recite certain prayers and read from the Torah scroll. *Minyanim* is the plural.

⁸¹ From phone conversation with James Walker 1/8/2015

than 2,000 years – the Talmud, the writings of Rashi and Rambam, Rabbi Joseph Caro’s *Shulchan Arukh*⁸²—and new commentaries and law codes that are still being written today across all denominations. For a variety of reasons, much early and medieval Karaite literature and law was not preserved, and even the Cairo *Geniza*⁸³, a “treasure trove” of rabbinic documents in the form of partial manuscripts, letters, receipts, poetry and more, had very little in the way of Karaite documents. Those that did and do still exist were written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic, and only in the past 60 or so years have scholars begun translating some of these important documents into English.

In 1952, Yale University Press published Karaite Anthology, a compilation offering a cross-section of Karaite literature translated and annotated by Leon Nemoy (1901–1997). He devotes 30 pages to Eliahu ben Moshe Bašyazi and his code of law, Aderet Eliahu (The Mantle of Elijah). Born in Adrianople (in Eastern Turkey) Bašyazi moved to Constantinople where he studied both Karaite and Rabbanite law and lore, along with astronomy and mathematics. He soon earned a reputation as an outstanding authority whose opinions were sought from as far as the Karaite settlements in Poland. According to Nemoy, Bašyazi spent more than 30 years producing this code, but died in 1490 without completing it. His brother-in-law, Caleb Afendopolo, continued the work, but he too died without completing it. The work was eventually published—even though it was still incomplete—in 1530 in Constantinople by Eliahu’s grandson. The result of this labor is “a work characterized by abundant content, logical reasoning, systematic exposition and a style that makes it easily understandable to laymen as well as

⁸² The code of law written by Sephardic rabbi Joseph Caro in 1565, and is still considered authoritative today, especially among the Orthodox.

⁸³ A *geniza* is a hiding place. Documents containing God’s name may not be discarded, they must be collected and buried. The attic of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fostat (Old Cairo) was such a repository. See <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/Genizah.html> for more information.

scholars.”⁸⁴ *Aderet Eliahu* quickly became the standard manual of belief and practice, held in as high regard by the Karaites as the *Shulchan Arukh* is by Rabbanite Jews.

While Nemoy has provided background and excerpts from this work, Tomer Mangoubi, a 22-year old Boston native descended from Egyptian Karaites on his father’s side, is undertaking the task of summarizing, commenting on and translating *Aderet Eliahu* into English for today’s audience. Educated at the local Schechter school through eighth grade, and then at Gan Academy, a pluralistic Jewish high school, Tomer went to Be’er Sheva during college, where he started to learn more formally about Karaite Judaism. He said, “*Aderet Eliahu* was the first Karaite work I read. At first I couldn’t read the medieval Hebrew well, but I found it fascinating because of the exegetical and halakhic points it makes.”⁸⁵

English resources are scarce, and as mentioned earlier, Karaite Judaism is highly misunderstood. “People often think Karaites are very religious or dogmatic,” Tomer said, “people get Karaite *halakhah* wrong all the time.” Tomer has studied Karaite *halakhah* extensively, and said that even scholars—especially historians—don’t always “get it right.” He feels that “when historians look at a *halakhic* text they look for other things; they’re writing from an historical viewpoint. It doesn’t create an optimal way to understand Karaite Judaism, and leads to inaccuracy.”⁸⁶ Over the past several years, more and more people are writing about Karaites, but not a lot of Karaites are writing about themselves, especially in English.

An Internet search will bring up several sites related to Karaite Judaism, blogs by Karaite Jews and other interested individuals, and pages on additional sites that happen to include Karaite information or material. Knowing who and what information to trust can be a challenge, and

⁸⁴ p. 236, Karaite Anthology, Leon Nemoy, Yale University Press, London and New Haven, c. 1952, 3rd printing 1969

⁸⁵ From phone conversation with Tomer Mangoubi, 3/24/2015

⁸⁶ From phone conversation with Tomer Mangoubi, 3/24/2015

Tomer feels it's important to address this. In addition to his day job writing computer code for the healthcare industry, Tomer is undertaking the task of creating *Mikdash Me'at*⁸⁷, an English abridgement of Aderet Eliahu which will help make Karaite *halakhah* accessible to those not fluent in medieval Hebrew. Tomer hopes to show the richness of Karaite Judaism, which he and many others have called "rationalist Judaism" that interprets the Bible from a literal text standpoint along with an understand of logic and scientific reason.

A Pluralistic Approach to Judaism

Rabbis are often asked, "What does Jewish Law/Judaism say about X?" but rarely is there a single answer that would speak for all Jews or all Jewish laws. The concept of religious pluralism is fairly modern, but Jewish communities have always had a level of pluralistic practice, one that probably began as soon as the Israelites entered the Land of Israel, if not before.

Tradition teaches that every Jew, and anyone who chooses Judaism, was present for the Revelation at Sinai⁸⁸ when Moses (who Shawn Lichaa referred to in a phone conversation as "*Moshe Kara-einu*," loosely translated as "Moses the scripturalist") received the Torah from God. Ideally, every Jew would learn Torah well enough to understand its literal meaning, derive the correct interpretation, and observe the *mitzvot* in a manner consistent with that interpretation, while at the same time consulting more knowledgeable authorities in *halakhah*. In

⁸⁷ Translated as "diminished holy temple"

⁸⁸ Deut. 29:13-14, "I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day." The Babylonian Talmud (Shevu'ot 39a), commenting on this verse, says that all Jews were present at the Sinai encounter, including even those who had not yet been born or who were not yet Jews. For good measure, in the Midrashic collection known as Midrash Tanhuma Rabbi Samuel bar Nahmani adds "Their souls were there, even though their bodies had not yet been created." (from <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/rabbis-round-table/what-is-shavuot-for-jews-who-question-whether-god-gave-the-torah-at-sinai-1.430010>)

this manner, a community can be created that maintains accepted standards, yet tolerates some degree of deviance from its members.

For the past several years, many people have been citing a Pew Study⁸⁹ which shows that the “nones,” that is, Americans who do not identify with any religion, are the fastest growing “religious group” in the US. The Jewish community in the United States has seen a decline in affiliation, especially among young adults, resulting in synagogues merging and even closing. A variety of socio-economic factors account for this, including a trend towards more individual and personalized ways of communicating with a God figure, enter into this.

Karaite Judaism, with its emphasis on individual responsibility and authority, may allow Jews who reject the idea of a central organization that they see as dictating behavior to be authentically Jewish as part of a community—no matter how widespread—that accepts them as individuals and connects them to more than 3,000 years of history.

⁸⁹ <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

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