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Karaism: An Alternate Form of Jewish Celebration

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INTRODUCTION

This volume and the conference on which it is based are themselves celebrations of the diversity of contemporary Jewish celebration: new rituals, new rites of passage, new inclusion of historically marginalized Jewish groups, and new ways of looking at the tradition. Yet, with all the emphasis on the contemporary, we sometimes lose sight of the diversity of Jewish life in the past, as if until the modern period, all Jews were God-fearing and *halakhab*-observing. This accepted wisdom is widely believed despite all the evidence to the contrary in rabbinic discussions of the status of the nonobservant or the not sufficiently observant. In the premodern period, loyalty to traditional Jewish law may have been the theoretical norm, and what we now call secularism may not have been an option, but then, as now, not everyone who thinks he or she should observe the law, or whose neighbors think he or she should observe it, actually does so. The Jewish calendar provides a number of opportunities during which repentance is one of the major themes, especially during the High Holy Days; if people did not sin, why such an emphasis on repentance?¹

When looking at Jewish diversity in the present and in the past, we generally consider varieties of Rabbinic Judaism. Although Sephardim [Jews from Mediterranean lands] and Ashkenazim [Jews from Eastern Europe] had different practices concerning liturgy, dietary restrictions, or laws of purity, somehow they still were able to share the same *Shulhan Arukh* as the ultimate legal authority, with Sephardim bound by the words of the author, Rabbi Joseph Karo, and Ashkenazim by the comments of the glossator, Rabbi Moses Isserles. When members of modern Jewish denominations ask how much of the traditional prayer book should be maintained and which prayers should be modified in terms of modern sensitivities, they are still using the rabbinic prayer book as the standard from which they are deviating.

Some recent adjustments might have been made in the calendar, such as Reform Judaism's dispensing with the second day of holidays in the Diaspora, but the general outline of the calendar is still determined by the rules finalized over a thousand years ago in the rabbinic academies of Babylonia (present-day Iraq). Not all Jews believe the dietary laws are binding, but if they wish

to observe them, they know the basic outlines of the prohibited species, the norms of ritual slaughter, and the prohibition of milk and meat. Most Jews today might not accept the *Shulhan Arukh* as authoritative, but if one wants to know what the traditional standard is, it is to that book that one turns. In other words, normally when we think about Jewish diversity, we are thinking of diversity within Rabbinic Judaism, the Judaism that is based on the idea of an Oral Torah given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai and later encapsulated approximately 1,500 years ago in the Talmud.²

Rabbinic Judaism, however, has historically not been the only form of Judaism. However we reconstruct the religion of biblical Israel, it seems to have been significantly different than the Judaism of rabbinic literature, not to mention from modern Judaism. During the Second Temple period, any number of Judaisms competed for the hearts and minds of the Jewish populace; historical circumstances seem to have determined that Pharisaism, the precursor of Rabbinic Judaism, survived the destruction of the Temple and became dominant. Even with the canonization of the Talmud, the rabbinic pursuit of hegemony was never totally unchallenged; the greatest challenge came in the form of Karaite Judaism, an alternate variety of Judaism whose methods of Jewish celebration will be the topic of this essay.

Who are the Karaites? Simply put, they are Jews who do not accept the authority of the Talmud. Their rejection of the rabbinic Oral Torah has resulted in the development of a different Judaism with its own unique ritual practices, although in theological matters, they are remarkably close to Rabbanites, the followers of Rabbinic Judaism. Despite the accepted wisdom, and despite their name, which is most likely derived from the Hebrew *miqra* [scriptures], Karaites are not scriptural literalists; many of their own interpretations of the Bible and its legal requirements are as nonliteral as the Rabbanite ones.

Most histories of Judaism state that Karaism began in the late eighth century CE as a result of the personal pique of Anan ben David, a disgruntled office seeker who was passed over as a candidate to be exilarch, the head of the Jewish community in Babylonia. Today, we know that Anan's group, the Ananites, were not Karaites, but later Karaites did retroactively claim Anan as one of their own. The first Jews to call themselves Karaites lived only in the ninth century, but Karaism claims to be the original form of Judaism; it is Rabbinic Judaism that, they maintain, is an innovation from the Second Temple period. The discoveries of the Cairo Geniza (1897) and the Dead Sea Scrolls (1947) have led to the possibility of a connection between Medieval Karaism and Second Temple groups, but the evidence is not clear cut. Karaism developed fully only in the tenth and eleventh centuries during a

“Golden Age” in the Land of Israel. This was the period of greatest Karaite influence, but the idea that Karaites were ever a numerical threat to Rabbinic Judaism seems to be misplaced.

With the decline of the community in the Land of Israel in the wake of the Crusades, the next great Karaite center was in Byzantium (present-day Turkey); from there, Karaite communities were established in the Crimean Peninsula and in such Eastern European locations as Troki in Lithuania, Halicz in Galicia, and Lutsk in present-day Ukraine. When the Russian empire took over lands of Jewish habitation at the end of the eighteenth century, Karaites in these areas looked for ways to avoid discriminatory anti-Jewish legislation; eventually, they declared themselves a separate, non-Jewish ethnic group, a tactic that was vital for their survival during the Holocaust but that has alienated the few surviving Crimean and Eastern European Karaites from the Jewish people. At the same time, however, the ancient Egyptian Karaite community remained fully identified with the Jewish people, and today’s Israeli Karaite community, numbering approximately 25,000 individuals, is mostly of Egyptian origin. Most of the few thousand American Karaites, centered in the Bay Area of California, are also originally from Egypt.³

CALENDAR AND HOLIDAYS

This cursory historical survey must suffice to introduce the main topic of this article—namely, a review of some of the ways in which the Karaite celebration of Judaism differs from the standard Rabbanite patterns and an explanation of some of the reasons behind this divergence. We may begin with something simple: the calendar. The Bible gives no instructions as to how the calendar is to be calculated, and there seem to have been a number of competing calendrical systems in ancient Israel. Indeed, one of the major differences among the various rival forms of Second Temple Judaism was how to calculate the calendar. The calendar that survived—the luni-solar one used by Rabbinic Judaism—is now calculated in advance, but originally it was determined by actual observation of astrological and agricultural data. By the tenth century CE, when classical Karaism was in its formative stage, the calculated rabbinic calendar was fully developed and it no longer relied upon observation of natural phenomenon.

Karaites, for their part, argued that the ancient procedure of determining the calendar should be maintained. New months would begin only when the new moon was sighted, and a leap year would be proclaimed only if the ripening spring barley crop [the *aviv*] in the Land of Israel was not seen during the month before Passover. Eventually, when Karaites found themselves at a

distance from the Land of Israel and an observed calendar became unwieldy,⁴ they agreed that a calculated calendar could be used. They adopted, however, a slightly different calculation from the Rabbanite one; thus, the two calendars, although similar, are not synchronized, and the Karaite holidays usually fall a day or two after the Rabbanite ones.

Without going into the technical details of calendation, even a brief glance at the Karaite calendar will show some of its unique characteristics.⁵ In 5769 (2008-2009), the first day of Rosh Ha-Shana [the New Year] in the Rabbanite calendar was on Tuesday, September 30 (a Tuesday Rosh Ha-Shana is not a very common occurrence; it was occasioned by the beginning of the previous Passover on a Saturday night). Most Jews, even in Israel, where biblical holidays are usually only one day, observed two days of Rosh Ha-Shana, Tuesday and Wednesday. Yom Kippur was on Thursday of the following week.

In the Karaite calendar, however, the first of Tishrei was on Wednesday, October 1, not on Tuesday; it is called *Yom Teru'ab* and not Rosh Ha-Shana, and it lasted only one day.⁶ Furthermore, since the Karaite first of Tishrei was on Wednesday, the tenth of Tishrei, Yom Kippur, was on a Friday—that is, right before the Sabbath, which, as many Jews know, is not possible in the Rabbanite calendar. Why the differences?

First of all, the reason why the first day of Rosh Ha-Shana cannot come on a Wednesday in the Rabbanite calendar is specifically to prevent Yom Kippur from falling on a Friday, with its multiple complications. Leviticus 23:4 reads: “These are the appointed feasts of the Lord, the holy convocations, which [*otam*] you shall proclaim in their appointed season.” The Rabbis noticed that the word *otam*, referring to the holidays, could as easily be vocalized *atem*, “you,” understanding that the human element was paramount in determining when the holidays would occur. That included the possibility of making sure the holidays did not fall on undesired days of the week, which was accomplished by the use of certain “postponements.”⁷ Karaites, however, emphasize the part of the verse that states “in their appointed season”; it does not read “in their appointed seasons unless it is inconvenient.” Thus, most holidays can fall on any day of the week in the Karaite calendar.

Second, the Torah never calls the first of Tishrei the New Year, Rosh Ha-Shana; after all, in the biblical calendar, the first month is the month of Passover in the spring. The Bible calls the first day of the seventh month *yom teru'ab*, which Rabbanites understand to mean “the day of blowing the shofar.” The Karaites, maintaining the biblical name, say that nothing is mentioned about a shofar; *yom teru'ab* means a day of calling out loudly to God. Therefore, they do not blow the shofar as part of their holiday observance.

The third difference was the fact that the Karaite *Yom Teru'ah* is only one day long; again, the Bible is the source. The two days of the rabbinic Rosh Ha-Shana go back to the doubt as to when the holiday occurs, a doubt that existed in the Land of Israel as well as in the Diaspora (other one-day biblical holidays, such as Passover, became two days in the Diaspora but remained one day in Israel). Thus, a one-day Rosh Ha-Shana, or *Yom Teru'ah* according to the Karaite name.

As noted, generally Karaite holidays can fall on any day of the week. There is one major exception to this rule: Shavuot [Pentecost] can fall only on a Sunday. In a manner reminiscent of some Second Temple Jewish groups, Karaites interpret Leviticus 23:15, *mi-mahorat ha-shabbat* [on the morrow of the Sabbath], to mean that the *omer* offering of barley always begins on a Saturday night and Shavuot occurs fifty days later on Saturday night/Sunday (on different dates of the month), rather than the rabbinic fifty days after the beginning of Passover, always on the same date.⁸

The Karaite Sabbath celebrations are different from the Rabbanite ones as well. The Torah (Exod 35:3) forbids the use of fire on the Sabbath, but according to rabbinic law, lighting candles or preparing an oven before the Sabbath is permissible; indeed, late Friday afternoon candle lighting is obligatory, and the typical Rabbanite Jewish food for the Sabbath is the long-cooking *chulent* [or stew]. Anan ben David, however, taught that if a fire was found lit on the Sabbath, it should be extinguished rather than allowed to remain burning. For centuries, Karaites sat in dark, unheated homes and ate cold food on the Sabbath. As of the fifteenth century, a Karaite reform permitted lighting candles before the Sabbath, but it was not obligatory and no blessing is recited. Heating food and houses was still forbidden.⁹ Karaite law also forbids sexual relations on the Sabbath, in contrast with the rabbinic endorsement of such activity.

Going back to the calendar and the other holidays, there are some additional divergences with Rabbanite practice. Karaites do not observe Hanukkah (at least not as a religious holiday), since it is postbiblical. The biblical holiday of Purim is celebrated in the first Adar of a leap year, not the second. Some of the fast days are on different dates; for instance, the fast known as *Tish'a be-Av*, the ninth of *Av*, is celebrated twice—on the seventh and on the tenth of that month. The four species of Sukkot (the palm, the myrtle, the willow, and the citron) are not used in the synagogue; at most they might decorate the sukkah. It has often been noted that a sure sign of schism is the adoption of a sectarian calendar; this has certainly been the case with the Karaites.

SYNAGOGUE AND LITURGY

A Karaite synagogue is very different from a Rabbanite one—true, there is a *bimah* [raised platform] in front with an *aron qodesh* [holy ark], and there is a separate women's section, but there are no chairs, only rugs on the floors.¹⁰ The worshippers remove their shoes before entering the synagogue, and at various points in the service they practice full prostration. Some of the prayers are accompanied by other motions, such as raising the arms in supplication. There are other differences as well: the threads of the Karaite prayer shawl, the *tallit*, are knotted and twisted differently than on the Rabbanite *tallit*; the Karaites do not use phylacteries (the *tefillin*) or parchments on the doorposts (the *mezuzot*) at all, giving a nonliteral interpretation of the injunctions in Deuteronomy. Karaites do put up a mezuzah-like item on their doorposts, but it is in the shape of the Ten Commandments and does not include biblical selections written on parchment.

Most remarkable of all in the Karaite synagogue is the order of prayers; their prayer book is not at all familiar to most Jews. It is not a reworking of the Rabbanite prayer book but a totally different text, based mainly on biblical passages (thus, it is missing the central Rabbanite prayer, the *shemonah esreh*, the “eighteen blessings”). Everything is said out loud, sometimes responsively with a leader, and the service can last for many hours (much like in a Sephardic synagogue). Each man who participates in the Torah reading must read his own section.

The Karaites have no concept of a prayer quorum (the Rabbanite *minyan* of ten). Any number of Karaites can pray together with no distinction between men, women, or minors.¹¹ There is also no concept of different obligations for a minor as compared to an adult; as soon as Karaite children can fast, the expectation is that they will do so on the fast days, like Yom Kippur. Karaite tradition, therefore, has no place for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebration marking the transition to legal adulthood. Nevertheless, modern Karaites do make note of this rite of passage.¹²

FOOD

The Bible specifies which animals are permissible to be eaten and which are forbidden, as well as prohibiting the eating of blood and the cooking of a goat in its mother's milk. Rabbanites have understood this latter prohibition to include cooking, eating, or deriving benefit from any meat (including fowl but not fish) with any milk. Karaites did not accept that interpretation, and, thus, they have no separate dishes, silverware, sinks, or tablecloths for these two categories. They do not wait between eating milk and meat or vice versa.

The only concession the Karaites make to the separation of milk and meat is a prohibition of two items from the same species at the same meal. A beef burger with cow's cheese would be forbidden; with goat's cheese, it is allowed.

Certain Karaite dietary restrictions are actually stricter than Rabbanite ones. They forbid the eating of what is called the fat-tail, which rabbinic law allows. After the ritual slaughter (which is mandated in both Karaite and Rabbanite law even though it is not explicitly required in the Torah), the Karaites check the animal's body parts in a manner that is different than the rabbinic requirement. And the blessing recited over slaughtering an animal refers to the permission to slaughter, not to the obligation as in the rabbinic blessing. Thus, a Karaite cannot legitimately eat food that is kosher according to rabbinic standards.

PERSONAL STATUS

There is one more important aspect of Karaite law that separates them from Rabbanites, and that is in the realm of marriage and personal relations. Karaite law tends to be much stricter in terms of incest; for instance, early Karaism forbade most relations between a husband's relatives and his wife's relatives, eventually making marriage in a relatively small group almost impossible. An eleventh century reform modified those prohibitions, allowing greater flexibility in marriage partners. Nevertheless, to this day, the Karaites prohibit relations that the Rabbanites allow. Thus, on the basis of the analogy with the biblically prohibited aunt-nephew relations, uncle-niece relations are also not allowed. In rabbinic tradition, not only is uncle-niece marriage allowed, but it is even considered praiseworthy.¹³

The Karaite marriage and divorce procedures are similar enough to the Rabbanite ones to look familiar, but they are sufficiently divergent as to make intermarriage between the groups a legal problem. In general, Sephardic, especially Egyptian, rabbis have been more accepting of Karaite-Rabbanite marriage, when the Karaite partner agrees to accept rabbinic law, than Ashkenazic rabbis. There may also be sociological considerations behind the divergent practices, since Karaites in Islamic countries tended to identify as part of the Jewish community whereas relations between Rabbanites and Karaites in Christian countries were usually not as close. In any event, the difficulty of Karaite-Rabbanite marriage leads to interesting developments in the State of Israel, where Jewish marriage and divorce are controlled by the Orthodox rabbinic rabbinate.¹⁴

MODERN KARAITE ASSIMILATION

The discussion up to now has described what might be called traditional, classical Karaism.¹⁵ Yet, just as many modern Rabbanite Jews no longer observe Jewish law fully, the same is true for Karaites. The spread out nature of the Bay Area community makes walking to the synagogue impossible, even for the acting rabbi.¹⁶ Assimilation can be seen in the Israeli community as well. A number of years ago I attended the ritual circumcision of the son of the national secretary of the Israeli Karaites, held in a catering hall in Ashdod, one of their centers. The catering hall had a certificate from the local rabbinic rabbinate testifying to its kosher status. When queried about this, one of the Karaite rabbis said it was okay; for those who cared, there was a fish alternative. Only the Karaite rabbis eschewed the meat.

In addition to the inroads of modernity, Israeli Karaites have another reason to loosen the chains of their religious traditions. In Israel, many Rabbanite Jewish practices are not just religious rites but national celebrations as well. Thus, Hanukkah is a national holiday, celebrating an ancient Jewish military victory, not merely commemorating the putative miracle of the oil that lasted eight days. It is hard for an Israeli Karaite to ignore the national aspects of Hanukkah, even though this postbiblical holiday is not in the Karaite calendar.

Other factors also discourage Karaite observance. The Israeli calendar follows the Rabbanite yearly cycle; schools, factories, and many businesses are closed on the holidays according to the Rabbanite calculation; they are often open on the days on which the Karaites celebrate. No Rabbanite child has to choose between going to synagogue for the holiday or going to school; this is not the case for Karaites. The Israeli army provides kosher food for all soldiers but not special food to meet Karaite needs. Israeli chaplains are Rabbanite rabbis; Karaite soldiers have no religious guidance inside the army.

CONCLUSION

This article has given a little taste of the alternate form of Judaism called Karaism and its distinctive celebration of Judaism. Despite inroads of secularization and acculturation, present-day Karaites have succeeded in maintaining their own separate identity and rituals, continuing a tradition of at least 1,200 years. Their unique forms of celebrating Judaism are part of the story of their survival over the centuries.

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Ephraim Kanarfogel, "Rabbinic Attitudes toward Nonobservance in

the Medieval Period,” in *Jewish Tradition and the Non-Traditional Jew* (ed. Jacob J. Schacter; Northvale: J. Aronson, 1992), 3-35.

² One of the major historical disagreements among the various denominations of Rabbinic Judaism is the extent to which either the Written or the Oral Torah is considered divine or divinely inspired, a question that then has an impact on possibilities of innovation and change. Nevertheless, these discussions assume that the Bible, the Talmud, and subsequent rabbinic literature are the molders of the Jewish tradition.

³ Meira Polliack, ed., *Karaite Judaism: A Guide to its History and Literary Sources* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003), contains articles from different points of view describing Karaite history and accomplishments. For further background, see Zvi Ankori, *Karaites in Byzantium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); Fred Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004); Philip Birnbaum, ed., *Karaite Studies* (New York: Hermon Press, 1971); Daniel Frank, *Search Scripture Well: Karaite Exegetes and the Origins of the Jewish Bible Commentary in the Islamic East* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2004); Daniel J. Lasker, *From Judah Hadassi to Elijah Basbyatchi: Studies in Late Medieval Karaite Philosophy* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008); Leon Nemoy, *Karaite Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952); Naphtali Wieder, *The Judean Scrolls and Karaism* (London: Horovitz, 1962), reprinted with additions (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2005).

⁴ Notice how in the Islamic world the end of Ramadan and the feast of Id al-Fitr can come on different days in different countries, and until the new moon is sighted, one does not know for sure when Ramadan ends and the new month begins.

⁵ I will be using the calendar issued by the Religious Council of Universal Karaite Judaism, Ramlah, 5769 (2008-2009).

⁶ In fall, 2008, the Web site http://www.karaite-korner.org/holiday_dates.shtml posted that *Yom Teru'ah* fell on Thursday, October 2, and Yom Kippur on Saturday, October 11; this Web site is run by Nehemiah Gordon, an Israeli who is a former American Rabbanite Jew, who has become a Karaite but does not always agree with the Israeli Karaite leadership. The Web site is a good source in English for Karaite beliefs and practices.

⁷ Rosh Ha-Shana cannot fall on a Sunday, Wednesday, or Friday; Passover cannot fall on a Monday, Wednesday, or Friday. These postponements prevent Yom Kippur on a Friday or a Sunday (i.e., two consecutive Sabbath days) and Hoshana Rabba on a Saturday (since the holiday is marked by breaking of willow branches, forbidden on the Sabbath). For a brief description of the Rabbanite Jewish calendar, see Arnold A. Lasker and Daniel J. Lasker, “Behold, A Moon is Born! How the Jewish Calendar Works,” *Conservative Judaism* 41:4 (Summer, 1989): 5-19.

⁸ For references to the non-Pharisaic practice, see Mishnah Hagigah 2:4; Menahot 10:3.

⁹ It is hard to see how Lithuanian Karaites survived the winter there without some sort of heating on the Sabbath.

¹⁰ Some Karaite synagogues, including the one in Beer Sheva, have taken to putting up folding chairs in the back for elderly participants whom they wish to spare physical exertion, but this is not in accord with authentic Karaite tradition.

¹¹ Women sit in a separate area of the synagogue, and Karaites deny entry to the

synagogue to menstruating and postparturient women. Nevertheless, in the Beer Sheva synagogue at least, some of the Psalms are led by women from their section, and children are also able to lead the recitation of certain prayers. In classical Karaism, women did not play a ritual role in the synagogues.

¹² A number of years ago someone sent me a clipping from the San Francisco Jewish newspaper about a Karaite youngster who was given the choice between a Karaite and a Rabbanite Bar Mitzvah. According to the newspaper, the boy chose the Karaite Bar Mitzvah in order to maintain the family tradition. Apparently, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to deny Karaite youths what has turned into the ultimate Jewish rite of passage, even if it is not part of their tradition. Hence, Bar and now Bat Mitzvah have become Karaite ceremonies in Israel and as well as in the United States.

¹³ The biblical prohibition of aunt-nephew relations is found in Leviticus 18:12-13; 20:19; for a positive rabbinic statement about uncle-niece marriage, see B. Yevamot 62b.



Fig 1: Karaite Synagogue Interior - Ashdod. Note the absence of chairs or benches. This feature is typical of practically all Karaite synagogues in all countries of the world; a few chairs for the elderly may be found at the entrance in the area called *moshav zeqeinim*.

Photo by Mikhail Kizilov

¹⁴ The summary by Michael Corinaldi, *The Personal Status of the Karaites* (Jerusalem: R. Mas, 1984) (Hebrew), is somewhat dated but still very useful.

¹⁵ A number of aspects of Karaite law have not been surveyed here—for instance, ritual purity and impurity including laws of menstrual separation, as well as Karaite understandings of civil and criminal law and agricultural laws pertaining to the Land of Israel.

¹⁶ A description of this community is available in Ruth Tsoffar, *The Stains of Culture: An Ethno-Reading of Karaite Jewish Women* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006).



Fig 2: Mezuzah - Ashdod Synagogue. A Karaite “mezuzah” placed at the gate leading to the entrance to the Ashdod synagogue. Karaite “mezuzot” are usually metal symbolic images of the Tablets of Law—and not parchments with biblical passages (Deut 6:4-9, 11:13-21) used by the Rabbanites. Karaites normally treat their mezuzot as Rabbanites treat theirs, e.g, kissing them upon entering a building. Photo by Mikhail Kizilov



Fig 3: Karaite Synagogue Exterior - Cairo. The Musa Dari Karaite synagogue in the center of Cairo is named after the most famous medieval Karaite poet, Musa Dari. At the moment it is forsaken by the community and is in the hands of Egyptian authorities; until recently there was a small library with Karaite books, photos, and manuscripts in the small building in front of the synagogue. Photo by Mikhail Kizilov



Fig 4: Karaite Kenassa - Chufut Kale (Crimea). Eastern European Karaites, who speak a Turkic dialect, called their synagogues “kenassa,” a word of mixed Semitic origin (similar to the Hebrew *beit kenaset*). The mountainous fortress of Chufut Kale was the main seat of the Crimean Karaites until the mid-nineteenth century. Note the unusual Oriental design of the building. Photo by Mikhail Kizilov



Fig 5: Karaite *Kapporet* - Halicz. The *kapporet* is a valence or short curtain hung on the Ark of the Law above the long curtain [*parokhet*]. This nineteenth century *kapporet*, with gold embroidery, originally was used in the Karaite synagogue in Halicz (now in Ukraine), formerly the site of the main Karaite community in Galicia. It was donated by Hanna, the wife of Rabbi Levi. Photo by Ivan Yurchenko



Fig 6: Karaite residents at the entrance to Karaite synagogue – Jerusalem, 1921. The people in this photograph may have constituted the entire Karaite community in Jerusalem in 1921. The man with a beard in the middle is the *bazzan* [head] of the community; the man standing to the right of him is the Crimean Karaite E. Sinani, later also elected as the *bazzan*. After 1948, the community dwindled to two persons only. Photo by J. Prik. Published in the Polish Karaite periodical *Mysł Karaimska* Vol. 2, nos. 3-4 (1930-1931): 28-b.



Fig 7: Karaite Mug. The catchphrase “by the book” indicates the widespread belief that Karaites are literalists who do everything strictly according to the simple meaning of the biblical text. In reality, they have their own exegetical stances which are often non-literal; these alternate interpretations of biblical verses are the reason for a legal system that is different than that of Rabbanite Jews.

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