

Maimonides and the Karaites

Rabbi Darren Kleinberg

1. Heschel on Maimonides

Maimonides, who had gained a marvelously quick insight into the conditions of Egyptian Jewry, was dismayed to note the signs of religious decay. He detected the source of danger in the **Karaites**.

This Jewish sect, originating in the eighth century, was an independent branch, leading a completely separate existence from the trunk. Of the Jewish religion, they retained only the letters of the Torah; and theirs became a domain that was utterly alien to Judaism. But, while this sect was already declining in other countries, it kept gaining ground in Egypt and finally threatened to crush Jewish life. In dealing with the Arab government, the **Karaites** would present their secession from Judaism as a parallel to the position of the Shiites vis-à-vis the Sunnites, the orthodox in Islam. The **Karaites** thus evidently won the special goodwill of the Shiite Fatimites, who had been ruling Egypt since the tenth century. The Mohammedans also assumed that the **Karaites** were closer to Islam than to Talmudic rabbinical Judaism. Egypt had large, influential Karaite communities, and they made highly offensive attempts at wooing followers for their doctrines among the Jewish traditionalists. The propaganda had considerable success. Many Jews joined the politically favored **Karaites**. But even those who did not definitively convert fell prey to the influence of the Karaite teachings and began to neglect the Talmudic prescriptions.

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The rabbis seemed powerless in the face of this assimilation. They could not even prevent mixed marriages between Jews and **Karaites**.¹⁰ Only **Maimonides** tried to bring help against this breach. The first task was to determine the boundaries between Jews and **Karaites**. Around 1167, in Alexandria, a “God-fearing and learned man, who reverently honored the word and commandment of God,” asked **Maimonides** how the Jews who were loyal to their tradition ought to behave toward the **Karaites**. Could they receive and return their visits, could they circumcise Karaite children and enjoy Karaite wine? Anyone knowing **Maimonides**’s tendency toward isolating the Jews from the **Karaites** would expect a negative answer. But his recommendation, “according to what we have learned from Heaven,” is that Jews should show the **Karaites** the honor due every human being, and act justly, peacefully, truthfully, and humbly towards them. This attitude is proper so long as the **Karaites** deal sincerely with the traditional Jews, “without twisting their mouths or using a vicious tongue,” and so long as they refrain from denigrating contemporary Jewish authorities, “not to mention our holy teachers of the past, whose words we live by.” We should then circumcise their children even on the Sabbath, bury their dead, and comfort their mourners. Since we must practice the commandment of brotherly love toward non-Jews, then how much more so toward the **Karaites**. We are allowed to enjoy their wine, for they are not idolaters. But if they desecrate the Holy Days and celebrate our festivals at other times which they have devised, a Jew faithful to his tradition should not visit them on those days.¹¹

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From the very start, **Maimonides** seems to have advocated a separation from the **Karaites**. And perhaps it was during his Alexandrian period that he gave his decision in response to a question: he said that the **Karaites** were not fit to take part in a minyan, the required quorum of ten for prayers in a congregation; nor could they be one of the three necessary for saying prayers at a meal. The philosopher explained his judgment by pointing out that the **Karaites** themselves do not recognize the Talmudic rule about this number, and thus they cannot fulfill that obligation.¹² The very fact that this problem was so important shows how far the social dealings between the two religious groups had gone in cultic matters, the true area of division. **Maimonides** disqualified the **Karaites**. Their expulsion from Jewish life had begun.

In his commentary on one of the most popularly read portions of the Mishnah, **Maimonides** made a statement that

could only be intended as a defense against Karaite assimilation: "The tanna [Talmudic teacher] Antigonus once said: 'Do not be like the servants who serve the Lord for the sake of a reward, but be like the servants who serve the Lord out of love.' Antigonus had two disciples, Zadok and Boethos. When they heard what he said, they left him, saying one to the other: 'Lo, our teacher expressly says that for man there is neither a reward nor a punishment nor a hope for a coming life.' They abandoned Judaism, forsaking the doctrines, and each of them founded a sect. They claimed they did believe in the Torah and contested the oral tradition. That was how *corruptive sects like the Karaites in Egypt* were born. They began to take issue with the teachings and interpret Biblical verses as they liked, without relying on any authority, and they acted against the Word of God."¹³

This sharp offensive by a newly arrived young scholar against the old established and powerful **Karaites** aroused the anger of those he had attacked. The objectivity of his stance in dictating a radical segregation in religious matters but no break in social life could not protect him against the enmity of the **Karaites**. **Maimonides** was unable to remain in Alexandria.¹⁴

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2. Another perspective

RELATIONS WITH **KARAITES**

The calendar was the main cause of disagreement between **Karaites** and Rabbanites. Rabbanite Jewish communities followed a calendar regulated by astronomical calculations.²⁵ The **Karaites**, however, retained the ancient method of determining the new month by witnesses' observation of the new moon's appearance, which was less accurate and tended to vary from place to place. **Karaites** and Rabbanites consequently celebrated holidays on different days, leading to disorders when, for instance, one group was observing the Day of

Atonement solemnly and the other was opening stores, or when one group was observing Passover by eating matzot and the other was not observing and eating bread.

Moreover, the **Karaites** observed the Sabbath strictly, prohibiting lights in the house, heating, warm food, and sexual relations. The **Karaites** prohibited entry into Rabbanite synagogues illuminated by lamps on the Sabbath.

They also expanded the definition of incestuous marriages beyond the scriptural forbidden degrees, making it difficult to find marriage partners within their own community and necessitating mixed marriages with Rabbanites on all social levels.

Despite differences, Rabbanites and **Karaites** considered themselves a single religious community and were so recognized by the Muslim authorities. The Ra'is al-Yahud was responsible for both groups, as we have seen (ch. 12). When **Karaites** and Rabbanites intermarried, the partners adhered to their own denominations while respecting the customs of the other, although in some cases one member of the married couple would adopt the traditions of the other.

In his *Commentary on the Mishnah* and *Mishneh Torah*, **Maimonides** declared the **Karaites** heretics (*minim*). In his responsa, however, he tended to be more flexible and to view the **Karaites** as fellow Jews. When asked by an esteemed scholar how the Rabbanites should conduct themselves toward **Karaites** with respect to circumcising their sons, greeting them, visiting their homes, and drinking their wine, he responded:²⁶

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These **Karaites**, who live here in Alexandria, Cairo, Damascus, and other places of the Land of Ishmael [Islam] and outside, should be treated with respect and approached with honesty. One should conduct oneself with them with modesty and in the way of truth and peace, as long as they conduct themselves with us with integrity, avoiding crooked speech and devious talk [cf. Prv 4:24] and preaching disloyalty [cf. Isa 32:6] toward the Rabbanite Sages of the generation; all the more that they avoid mocking the words of our holy Sages (peace upon them), the Tannaim, the Sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud, whose words and customs we follow, which they established for us from Moses and the Almighty. Therefore, we should honor them and greet them, even in their houses, and circumcise their sons, even on the Sabbath, bury their dead, and comfort their mourners.²⁷

Excerpt taken from: Kraemer, Joel L. Maimonides: The Life and Work of One of Civilizations Greatest Minds. 2008.

3. In Practice

Marriages between Karaite and Rabbanite partners came to a halt when Moses Maimonides (Rambam, 1138–1204) argued that while the Karaite marriage itself was binding, their bill of divorce was invalid (probably because of its formulation in Hebrew). Since the children issued from the second union of a Karaite divorcée would be illegitimate (mamzerim), and since it was not always possible to ascertain that a divorce had not occurred in previous generations in a Karaite family, Maimonides decided to consider all Karaites as potential mamzerim, and therefore prohibited for marriage.

Taken from: <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/karaite-women>