

The Karaite Jewish community in Israel (20th and 21st centuries)

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Abstract

The academic world has at its disposal a vast quantity of resources concerning the history and culture of the Karaite Jewish community. These resources include Biblical manuscripts, works on Biblical exegesis and *Halakhah* (Jewish law), grammatical texts, letters on community affairs, wedding contracts and other important texts that shed much light upon Karaite religious observance, history, and culture. The aim of this paper is to present to the reader in a concise manner the facts regarding the development of the Karaite Jewish community in Israel in the 20th and 21st century. In addition, it endeavors to describe the relationship between the Karaite Jewish community and other communities, in particular the Rabbinite Jewish community in Israel and the USA.

Keywords

Karaite Jewish origins, UKJ – Universal Karaite Judaism, intermarriage, Karaite *Halakhah*, KJU – Karaite Jewish University

1. Introduction

1.1. Origins

The exact sequence of events that gave rise to Karaite Judaism and its early development have been lost in the distant past, and is a subject still strongly debated in the academic world (AKHIEZER 2011: 723-724). However, we do

know that there was a migration to the Land of Israel of famous Karaite Jewish¹ sages primarily from Persia and Babylon sometime in the 8th and 9th century. They proceeded to develop an important Karaite center in Jerusalem which lasted approximately 150 years until its final destruction, along with the city, at the hands of the First Crusade in 1099. After this tragic event, the Karaite center shifted to Byzantium (ANKORI 1957), which soon became a center of Karaite scholarship producing such major works as the 'Eshkol ha-Kofer' written by the great Karaite sage Judah Hadassi (LASKER 2008), in the middle of the 12th century. Around the 13th and 14th centuries, the Karaite center moved further north to the Crimea and Lithuania. In general, throughout their entire history Karaites were regarded as being part of the wider Jewish community, whether in the Diaspora or in the Land of Israel. In locations throughout the Diaspora, Karaite and Rabbanite communities were found residing side-by-side. Soon after the State of Israel gained independence, Karaite Jews came to Israel from Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Europe, laying the foundations for Israel's current Karaite community.

1.2. Karaite Jewish immigration to the State of Israel

The Karaite Jews made *aliyah* (immigration to the State of Israel) in three main waves:

- First wave: 1948-1949
- Second wave: 1954-1956
- Third wave: 1967-1970

These three waves became the backbone of the Karaite Jewish community in Israel that has continued to thrive to the present day.

2. Karaite Jewish communities: The present

The Karaite Jewish world population is presently estimated at approximately 40,000 in Israel and another 10,000 remaining in the Diaspora. The Karaite

¹ The famous sages were: Daniel Al-Qumisi, Salamon ben-Yeruham, Sahl ben Masliyah, Yefeth ben Eli.

Jewish population of Israel is predominantly made up of those (Karaites) who came from Egypt (EL-KODSI 2006: 326-330) and their descendants, the remainder being from Iraq (Hit, هيت) and Europe.

In Israel, there are twelve active communities (CICUREL 2005), with fourteen Karaite Jewish synagogues where prayers are held daily. The synagogue in Rishon Le-Zion is the most recent to be established. It was inaugurated on the 21st of September 2011 after more than five years of preparation that involved the raising of funds from the Karaite Jewish community in Israel and the USA.

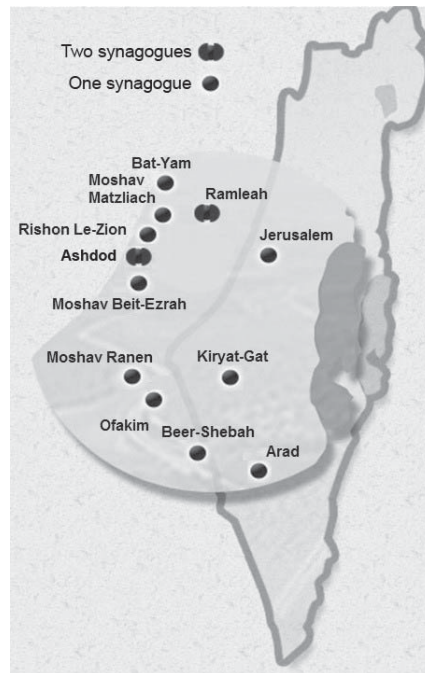


Fig. 1: Karaite Jewish communities and synagogues in Israel and the West Bank²

² The map is based on sources in the First Hebrew Karaite Portal (Karaim.net).

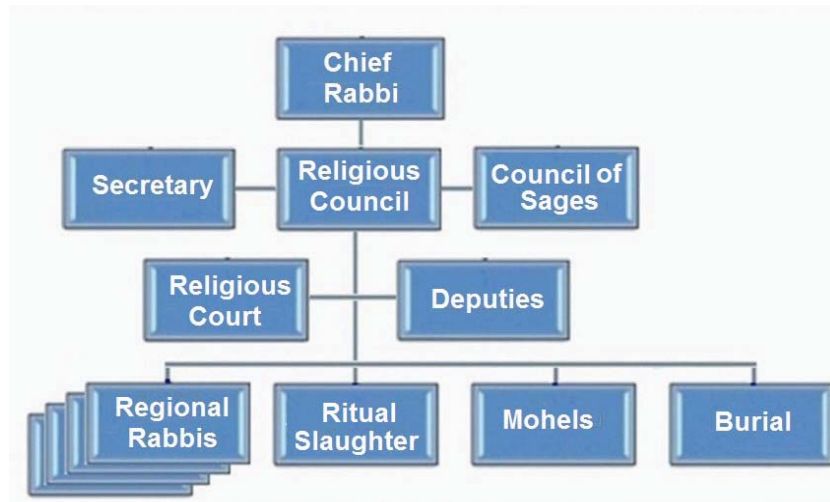


Fig. 2: The Religious Branch

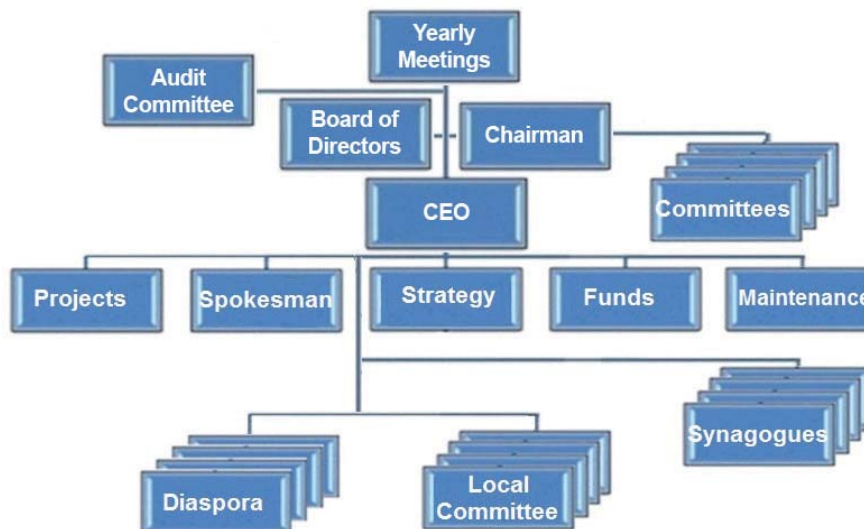
Source: <http://www.karaite.org.il/association/mivne>

Fig. 3: The Administrative Branch

Source: <http://www.karaite.org.il/association/mivne>

3. General information

The Karaite Jewish community in Israel is represented by a non-profit organization called *היהדות הקראית העולמית* or Universal Karaite Judaism (UKJ). The UKJ consists of two main branches, which are illustrated above in Figures 2 and 3. All activities are officially documented by the departments within each branch. The headquarters of the UKJ is located in Ramle where all formal meetings and activities take place.

4. Religious activities and certifications

The religious branch of the UKJ is responsible for the various religious bodies and religious activities of the community, for instance:

- Active Beth Din (Religious court)
- Monthly meetings of the Council of Sages
- Publishing of the yearly calendar for the community
- Morning and evening prayers in each of the communities' synagogues
- Torah lessons (more than 36 per week)
- Monthly education for the youth
- Religious lessons for Karaite Jewish soldiers
- First of the month prayer and meeting
- Lectures and meetings for the community
- Community meetings at the Anan Ben David synagogue in Jerusalem on Hag ha-Matzoth, Hag ha-Shavu'oth, and Hag ha-Sukkoth

In addition to the above, the religious branch has the duty and authority to grant religious certificates for the following:

- Scholar's (תלמידי חכמים) qualification
- Hazan's (cantor's) qualification
- Conversion courses (KJU)³
- Ritual slaughter's qualification

³ The only authorized organization by the UKJ for the teaching of Karaite Judaism is the Karaite Jewish University (KJU). For more information please visit: <http://kjuonline.com/>

- Bar Mitzvah ceremony⁴

The administrative branch is responsible for various cultural activities, such as:

- Community tours
- Senior citizen activities
- Lectures for the community
- Meetings with the community

In addition, activities which are related to the general running of the community include:

- The building of synagogues in Israel and their maintenance
- Charitable funds to help on Holy Days those families who are in financial need
- Providing financial help for brides from poor families.

5. General community issues

As with any other community, the Karaite Jewish community has its own unique issues. These issues consist of:

- Intermarriage between Rabbanite Jews and Karaite Jews
- Status of women (wedding ceremony, Beth Din)
- Status of children
- Relationship between Rabbinic Jews and Karaite Jews in Israel.

These issues are discussed briefly below.

5.1. Intermarriage between Rabbanite and Karaite Jews

This issue is a main concern to the community. The Karaite Jewish community was a "closed community"⁵ until the mid-1990s, when the religious leaders "opened the gates" of the community under specific situations. Even prior to the "opening of the gates" there has been intermarriage between Rabbanite

⁴ Although the Bar Mitzvah is not an original ceremony in the Karaite Jewish community, in Israel it has been adopted in order to increase the youth's involvement in Torah learning.

⁵ I.e. Intermarriage between Rabbinic Jews and Karaite Jews was not allowed.

Jews and Karaite Jews, and together with the secularization of Israeli society, this has become one of the main issues facing the contemporary Karaite Jewish community. Therefore, the current leadership is working on new programs with the intention of enriching the religious and social life of our people.

5.2. Status of women (wedding ceremony, Beth Din)

One of the main reasons that mixed couples (Karaite and Rabbanite) mainly decide to have a Karaite marriage ceremony, is that under Karaite *Halakhah* the bride has equal social status with the groom. This means that:

- She also signs the Ketubbah (religious marriage certificate)
- She has the right to ask for a divorce from the Beth Din (religious court) if her husband fails to fulfill his obligations to her
- The wife has full equality with her husband.

5.3. Status of children

In the Karaite tradition, which is based only on the Hebrew Bible, the father (by patrilineal descent) determines the Jewish legal status of the child. This means that when the question of belonging to the Karaite community arises, the Beth Din has full legal rights according to Israeli law to include the children as Karaite Jews for all intents and purposes.

5.4. Relations between Rabbanite and Karaite Jews in Israel

Generally, we can say that in the daily life of the Karaite Jews as individuals in Israel there are no specific problems. However, because Karaite Jews are spread amongst twelve active communities, we are facing huge financial problems in the maintenance of the community's infrastructure. According to Israeli law, Karaite Jews are considered as Jews, but because we have our own religious independence and we do not recognize the authority of the rabbinic institutions there are a few issues that remain unsolved which continue to cause various problems.

As long the Israeli government does not find a viable solution to the personal status of the Karaite Jews the problems will continue to grow and be more complicated.

6. Summary

As described, the Karaite Jewish community is facing many challenges from the secularization of Israeli society to logistic and financial problems. However, we are attempting to raise within the next generation a sense of responsibility and obligation to the traditions and culture of our ancestors.

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Moshe Firrouz (b. 1972, Or-Yehudah, Israel) holds degrees in Nuclear Engineering (B.Sc.) and Management & Safety Engineering (M.Sc.) from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Beer Sheva. Moshe Firrouz is currently acting as the Chief Rabbi of the Karaite Jewish community in Israel, and as the Vice-Chancellor of the Karaite Jewish University, in which he teaches part of the Introduction to Judaism Course. In 2013, he started Ph.D. studies at Ben-Gurion University under the guidance of Prof Daniel J. Lasker. His dissertation title is: "Studies in the Karaite Sage Judah Hadassi's Sefer Eshkol ha-Kofer (The Book of Cluster of Henna Blossoms)".

