

Karaites

Who are the Karaites, and do they keep Simchat Torah?

I have several times in the past come across Jews, invariably thoughtful and charming, who have told me that they are so fed up with the excesses of rabbinic Judaism that they have decided to become Karaites. Only this week a delightful young Israeli woman living in New York told me in synagogue that she was so fed up with extra days of festivals and other rabbinic added strictness that she too was a Karaite and so only kept one day of festivals.

Which set me wondering why my little Persian community in New York, most of who do not bother with second days, did not themselves adopt the Karaite variation? All the more since many of the early founders came from Persia. But the fact is that, if you look more carefully into it, becoming a Karaite is not really to be recommended, and if it might solve one set of problems it would create a heck of a lot of other ones.

The Karaites take their name from the word for "text" which indicates that they only accept the text of the Torah. They reject post-Torah rabbinic interpretations, additions, and customs, and those theological ideas such as Resurrection and Life After Death that are not explicit in the Torah. What makes them popular with Reform communities is that that accepted patrilineal descent as the definition of Jewish identity and they are even less happy about conversion than the London Beth Din.

Some scholars trace them back to the Sadducees, who themselves held such opinions, others to the Dead Sea Sects. They were dormant or marginal after the destruction of the Temple; but later and under the dynamic leadership of Anan Ben David (715-795), who some say really founded them, they flourished to such an extent that at one moment in the ninth century they nearly became the dominant sect in Judaism in Persia and Babylonia. Salo Baron thought they accounted for 40% of the Iraqi Jewish population.

It was thanks mainly to the great Saadiah Gaon (d. 942), who campaigned energetically and relentlessly against them, that they receded and declined to the very small sect that they are today. Currently some 30,000 live in Israel and about 4,000 in the USA. Despite their differences, Sephardi rabbis such as Rav David-Chaim Chelouche and the late Rav Ovadia Yosef have always maintained that they count as Jews and do not need conversions to "return to the fold". The Ashkenazi rabbinate, surprise, surprise, is not so open.

The Karaite calendar differs from the accepted Jewish calendar. It follows the literal reading of the Torah text for festivals lasting only one day. But I don't understand why they celebrate Simchat Torah, which is not mentioned in the Torah as such. They do not include Chanukah, as a post-Biblical festival, but do keep Purim.

But before you go out and sign up, let me tell you the downside. Not accepting rabbinic innovation does have its drawbacks. Karaites do not allow

lights and fire in their homes on Shabbat, although I am told reformist ideas on this issue now divide them into the "lighters" and "the darkeners". Still, no sex on Shabbat—that's a real downer, as are far stricter rules on family purity which really put women in a state of Purdah. And the laws of marriage are so strict that any blood relative however distant is forbidden. You really are hurting your chances of getting married! That more than anything else probably explains why there are so few today.

It's true they don't interpret the Torah texts about Tefillin and Mezuzot as requiring literal objects—they see them merely as symbolic—but they are very keen on Tzitzit, especially the blue thread. They do not take the four kinds of plants we wave on Sukot, because they understand the Torah references to mean that they were to be used only in building a Sukah. And because their laws of how to slaughter animals are different and stricter than Orthodox shechitah, this means that a good Karaite will not eat normal kosher meat. In addition if one cares about marrying "in" then the pool of possible partners is ridiculously small. If you are interested in learning more, they have websites such as www.karaite.org or <http://www.karaite-korner.org>. The fact that they have several that conflict must prove they really are regular Jews!

On balance, I conclude, it makes more sense from a social point of view to stay technically within the dominant expression of Jewish religious life. After all, we are small enough as it is compared to the major religions of the world and riven enough by denominational conflict as it is without confining oneself to an even narrower religious network. But then we have never played the numbers games. Still to claim adherence to an apparently more lenient way of life based simply on convenience, and usually ignorance, just does not cut it from the point of view of integrity or logic. If you don't want to keep something, fess up to it. Don't seek justification elsewhere.

If Karaites see themselves as part of the Jewish people then the variations in their beliefs and practices are no different than those of most Conservative and Reform Jews today. But if someone simply wants a justification for only keeping one day of Rosh Hashanah and the other festivals, there are, believe me, easier ways to go about it. Meanwhile we can all enjoy Simchat Torah together!