Episode Book

EPISODE #6436

Why Karaite Jews Rejected the Talmud

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SYNOPSIS

Karaite Judaism emerged over a millennium ago as a radical alternative to rabbinic tradition, rejecting the Talmud and the Oral Torah in favor of the written Hebrew Bible alone. From carpeted, shoeless synagogues and literal moon-sighting calendars to bypassing rabbinic legal workarounds, the movement maintained its own parallel Jewish life across Egypt, Crimea, and Byzantium. Today, roughly forty thousand adherents remain, mostly centered in Israel, practicing a text-focused faith that challenged the mainstream.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

They threw out the Talmud. Deliberately, twelve hundred years ago, and there are still forty thousand of them doing it. That was my reaction and it has not worn off.



Herman

It's the correct reaction, mostly because everyone assumes the Talmud won so completely that nobody would survive disagreeing.



Corn

He asked whether the oral law and the Talmud have pushed the written text to the margins, and now he wants the people who took that worry to its conclusion: the Karaites. Who are they, why did they do it, and where do they still exist.



Herman

And the short version of the third answer is: Ashdod, mostly. Let's meet the people who threw out the Talmud.



Herman

Karaite Judaism is the oldest surviving alternative to rabbinic Judaism, and I want to sit on that word, oldest, because people assume it's some modern reform project. It's not. It goes back to the Islamic Middle East, the eighth and ninth centuries, and it's still here. The defining claim is stark: the written Tanakh alone is the binding authority, and the Oral Torah, the Talmud, the whole rabbinic apparatus, is human invention layered on top.



Corn

The name itself is the whole manifesto.



Herman

It is! Kara, from mikra, scripture, to read. They named themselves after the text. And the epistemology is the part I find radical: every individual Jew has the personal responsibility to study the Torah and decide its correct meaning. Every interpretation, regardless of who produced it, gets the same scrutiny. They can read a Talmudic argument, they just refuse to exalt it.



Corn

A rabbi's ruling and your neighbor's ruling walk in with identical credentials.



Herman

Identical. Which is a more democratic epistemology than most movements have managed since.



Corn

But how does that work in practice? If every individual is their own authority, how do you get a congregation to do the same thing on the same morning? Doesn't it dissolve into a thousand private Judaisms?



Herman

In practice it doesn't, and the reason is interesting. Individuals study, but they study inside a community with an accumulated body of commentary, and the weight of that commentary is persuasive without being binding. It's the difference between a fence and a well-worn path. The rabbis built fences; the Karaites wore a path. You can step off a path, but mostly you don't, because it's the sensible way through.



Corn

And the scale?



Herman

At their peak, roughly ten percent of world Jewry. Today, somewhere between thirty and fifty thousand people, call it a third of one percent of fifteen million Jews. Overwhelmingly in Israel, about forty thousand.



Corn

A tenth of the world's Jews, down to a rounding error. That's a collapse worth explaining.



Herman

It is, and we'll get there. But first the theology, because the argument is better than people expect.



Corn

This is where I'd normally ask you to be fair to the rabbis.



Herman

I'm always fair to the rabbis. The Karaite case starts from a very clean premise: if God gave the commandments to Moses, they were written down. The whole Torah is presented as received text. Anything that arrives later, calling itself an explanation of that text, is by definition not the text. Judah Halevi put the Karaite position in the Kuzari, in the mouth of the sages' opponents under Alexander Jannaeus: "There is the written law, whoever wishes to study it may come and do so; take no heed of the oral law." That's the whole position in two clauses.



Corn

It has the appeal of a refund policy.



Herman

It does, and here's the misconception worth killing: people hear "scripture alone" and think "literalism." Their method is actually peshat, the plain meaning. Which they define as what an ancient Hebrew would have naturally understood when the books were first



Herman (continued)

written, not necessarily the literal words. So they're allowed context, they're allowed custom, they're even allowed changing their mind when a better reading turns up. It's a rival hermeneutic, not a machine that reads words off a page.



Corn

Give me a for-instance. Where does peshat and literalism actually diverge?



Herman

Take "an eye for an eye." A pure literalist has to demand an eye. The rabbinic tradition reads it as monetary compensation, and the Karaites, reading the plain sense in context, also arrived at compensation, because the surrounding verses talk about fines and restitution for other injuries, and it would be strange for one injury among them to demand mutilation. They got to a similar place as the rabbis by a different road, which tells you the method is reading, not scanning.



Corn

So the Karaites rejected the oral law entirely, and that is really the heart of it.
Edgar: Sorry, this is going to sound very basic, but what actually is the oral law? Is it like a set of instructions that got passed around by word of mouth, like a family recipe nobody wrote down? I have been listening for a while and nodding along, I just never caught step one.



Herman

No, that's... that's fair. Picture the Torah as a recipe that says "keep the feast." It never says how. When to start, what counts as bread, what a day begins at. The rabbis' answer is that those details came down alongside the text, mouth to mouth, from Sinai itself, and were only written down much later, in the Mishnah and then the Talmud. The Karaites looked at that and said: if it was that important, it would have been in the book.



Corn

He summarized fifteen hundred years of argument in a kitchen.



Herman

I did notice the cost, yes. Anyway. The origins are murky. The traditional attribution goes to Anan ben David, in eighth-century Babylonia, a disgraced exilarch candidate who, depending who you ask, either founded the movement or got retroactively adopted by it. The scholarship says the movement only crystallized as such in the last two decades of the ninth century, generations after Anan. Daniel Lasker's line is that the exact circumstances are unclear: some historians see a medieval revival of Second Temple sectarianism, others a total medieval invention.



Corn

We did the Sadducees already, so I'll just say: the revival camp has a reason to want it true.



Herman

It would be tidy, wouldn't it. And the ancestry fight is a whole genre. The rabbinic version, Ibn Daud's Sefer ha-Qabbalah from around 1160, has it starting in Baghdad in the Gaonic period under the Abbasids. The Karaite version, from Mordecai ben Nissan, traces their line to the Sons of Zadok of the Second Temple, priests, establishment. Geiger in the nineteenth century argued the Karaite link to the Sadducees, and Revel's dissertation tore into most of Geiger's arguments, so it's been a live quarrel for a century and a half without a verdict.



Corn

Each side's origin story conveniently makes them the older brother.



Herman

There's even a disputed document. Some Arab scholars claimed Karaites were in Egypt in the first half of the seventh century, citing a paper the Egyptian community kept until the late eighteen hundreds, supposedly stamped by Amr ibn al-As, the first Muslim governor of Egypt, dated 641, ordering the Rabbanites not to interfere with Karaite practice. If real, it predates Anan and upends the whole chronology. Nobody can check it now, so everyone gets to believe what they already believed.



Corn

An origin story that works like the oral law itself. Fitting.



Herman

Here's the part I find moving, though. Golda Akhiezer's work traces how the movement went, in her phrase, "from radical scripturalism fundamentally rejecting any transmitted tradition to the gradual development of alternative authentic Chain of Tradition." They built their own tradition. Their own legal literature, their own commentaries, their own line of transmission you're supposed to trust. The protest against inherited interpretation became an inherited interpretation.



Corn

The revolution got a genealogy.



Herman

Every one does, eventually. We did an episode on the paradox of anti-Zionist Jews living in Jerusalem, and this is the same shape: a position defined by rejecting the structure, sustained inside the structure's neighborhood, for centuries.



Corn

So what does the experiment look like on a Tuesday?



Herman

Concrete and visible. Shoes off in the synagogue, the sanctuary floor is carpeted, because that's where a person stands alone with the Creator. No Hanukkah, since it isn't commanded anywhere in the Tanakh. They keep their own calendar, with actual moon sighting. Women are treated as equals: no "who has not made me a woman" blessing, and they reject kol ba-isha erva, the voice of a woman is nakedness. On Shabbat, many read "kindle no fire" literally, so no heating food, no heating the house.



Corn

No Hanukkah. Someone finally read the label.



Herman

Maor Dabach, a Karaite prayer leader, put the Shabbat point sharply: "We don't accept all the rabbinic patents, like the Shabbat gentile, the Shabbat elevator and so on, because in our eyes that is desecration and they are forbidden by Karaite halakha." And I love that word, patents, because that's exactly how the Karaites see the rabbinic workaround apparatus: licensed inventions presented as the original product.



Corn

A Shabbat elevator is engineering doing theology's homework.



Herman

The Genizah gives you the lived texture, too. Among the fragments there's a letter of introduction from an Andalusi Karaite arriving in Egypt, on his way to Jerusalem, presenting himself as a Karaite to the community there. It's apparently the only known letter like it. Just a traveler with a sect's name, asking for the network. The movement had a network.



Corn

And the calendar point, the moon sighting, how does that even function now? Does someone stand on a roof in Ramla looking for a sliver of moon?



Herman

Functionally, the sighting tradition has been maintained by reference to observation in the Land of Israel, and the modern community coordinates it through the bet din, so it's less rooftop astronomy every month and more an institution certifying what the sky did. But the principle survives: the month begins when the moon is seen, not when a calculation says it ought to be. Which is, incidentally, closer to how everyone did it before Hillel the second fixed the calculated calendar in the fourth century. The Karaites are in some ways running the older software.



Corn

That's the thing about being the conservative schism: sometimes you're the archaeology.



Herman

That's the theory and the history. Where did it actually leave them?



Herman

Ten percent of world Jewry is an enormous number for a losing side. Their centers were the Land of Israel, Egypt, Byzantium, and Eastern Europe, Crimea, Lithuania, Ukraine. Four post-medieval zones, per Beider's migration work: the Arabic Middle East, Constantinople, Crimea, and Eastern Europe.



Corn

Egypt was the heartland?



Herman

The heartland, and the sharpest collapse. Cairo had about five thousand three hundred Karaites in 1937. By 1947, somewhere between three and a half and five thousand. By 1970, about two hundred. Today the whole of Egypt has, by one recent count, eighteen to twenty Jews left, essentially women. The Moses Al-Diri Synagogue in Abbasiya stands shuttered; a recent conservation study describes it as reflecting the decline of the sect. That's a community going from a major urban presence to a locked building inside one lifetime.



Corn

People who were alive for the last regular Shabbat there.



Herman

Yes. And the Eastern European branch is the strange one, because it stops being a theological story and becomes an identity story. The Crimean Karaites, the Karaim, speak a Turkic language. From the nineteenth century they increasingly split from mainstream



Herman (continued)

Judaism, and today most of them do not consider themselves Jews at all, but descendants of Khazars or other Turkic peoples. The genetics says otherwise: ethnic Jewish origin, closely related to other diaspora groups. The claim and the blood disagree.



Corn

Why would a Karaite want to stop being Jewish? Their whole pitch is being the real Jews.



Herman

Because under Nazi occupation, being classified as a Turkic people rather than Jews saved some of those communities from the fate of their Krymchak neighbors, who were destroyed. So you have people arguing, in good faith or bad, over whether a group is Jewish, and the argument decides who lives. It's the theological question with a body count attached.



Corn

The theological question always had one attached. This time it was just faster.



Herman

Fair. In Israel today the map is concentrated: about forty thousand, with Ashdod the largest community anywhere in the world, and Ramla the spiritual center, where the bet din sits. Be'er Sheva, Jerusalem, Bat Yam, smaller places, a couple of moshavim. The diaspora beyond that is thin: maybe fifteen hundred in the United States, a few hundred each in Ukraine, Poland, Crimea, Kazakhstan, Russia, Lithuania, and a small community in Brazil, of all places, in Paragominas.



Corn

Four hundred and eighty-one in Ukraine. Thirty-four in a Polish town is a book club. At some point a community becomes a mailing list.



Herman

Ashdod's community arrived mostly from Egypt in the fifties, and the cornerstone of their Anan HaNasi synagogue went down in October 1959, with a second synagogue, Keter Torah, inaugurated in 2010. A community that fled Cairo with nothing rebuilt two synagogues in one lifetime.



Corn

Theology aside, that's the familiar Israeli arc.



Herman

It is, and the legal position is where it gets unresolved. The Karaite bet din was founded in 1948, with the state itself, sits in Ramla, deals with personal status, marriage and divorce. Supreme Court rulings give it exclusive authority over Karaite marriage and divorce, and family courts routinely refer Karaite couples to it. Its registrar, Rabbi Moshe Firouz, is authorized under the marriage ordinance like any registrar. So the state says: equal in every respect.



Corn

The state says that. The rabbinate is a different parliament.



Herman

And there it's split three ways. Ovadia Yosef, in 1971, declared Egyptian Karaites Jewish and marriage with them permissible, and there are ten responsa letters on the question in his collected correspondence, so he took it seriously. At the other end, some recent Ashkenazi Haredi scholars have held Karaites should be treated as Gentiles in all respects, though that's not universally accepted. And in between, there's the older worry that because Karaites don't follow rabbinic divorce law, their descendants could be mamzerim, and the Economist reported over a decade ago that some religion-ministry rabbis were refusing to register Karaite marriages. Those are the competing claims and I don't think they've reconciled.



Corn

So the same marriage is valid in Ramla, a question mark in Jerusalem, and fine per Ovadia Yosef if the couple came from Cairo.



Herman

And look at the irony sitting on top of it: a movement founded on rejecting interpretive tradition now has a Chief Rabbi, a bet din, legal literature, a chain. Akhiezer's arc, completed. The Karaites didn't escape the structure. They built a smaller one with better lighting.



Corn

You almost admire it. Every revolution discovers it needs a registrar.



Hilbert

The donkey's right, though.



Hilbert

I rang Avram while you two were going on about the fire. Avram Nissim, bookbinder in Ramla, binds for the Karaite bet din, been dealing with him since before this show. I asked him whether the prohibition covers a thermostat, since Corn was talking about the house heating. He talked for eleven minutes, I wrote down four of them. He says the Karaites are the only Jews who ever read the instruction manual before using the appliance, that the rabbis kept the box and lost the manual, and that a thermostat set on Friday is not fire, it's a promise. Don't trust him. He once bound a Haggadah for me back to front and charged extra for the spine.



Hilbert

Corn, you dropped a consonant on "Mishnah" earlier, I'll clean it in post.



Hilbert

Thirty-odd years back I did the experiment myself, one month in a flat governed strictly by the literal words of the lease. No guests not named, no alterations, definitions only of what the lease defined. By day four I was keeping the exceptions log on a board. The board is bolted to the storeroom wall here, behind me, blocking the fuse box. The kettle I allowed, since the lease said "open flame" and the kettle has no flame. The bookbinder's counter is at claw height for a reason, I'll have you know, he had it made low for me and never said why.



Hilbert

Avram's actual answer, at the end, quiet: he said the cold house on Shabbat is the point. You notice the day is different. He's not a man I'd trust with a delivery, but he means it.



Herman

He's describing the deliberate discomfort, the same logic as the shoes off. The inconvenience is the observance.



Corn

The thermostat is a promise is the most rabbinic sentence a Karaite-adjacent bookbinder ever produced.



Herman

Which is Akhiezer's finding played out in one man. You reject the interpretive tradition, then life hands you a thermostat, and somewhere a ruling gets made and remembered.



Corn

Will the Ashdod community hold? Forty thousand, two synagogues, their own courts, but the marriage question sits unresolved in the rabbinic establishment, and every unresolved status question in Israel eventually finds its way to a courtroom. That's the thread to watch.



Herman

And Avram's cold house is the honest report on the whole experiment: text alone, enforced sincerely, and within a generation you're keeping a log of promises. The Karaites ran it for twelve hundred years, which is longer than most revolutions get.



Corn

Producer credit to Hilbert Flumingtop, who trimmed a consonant and answered a theological question by telephone. This has been My Weird Prompts. Find us at my weird prompts dot com. We'll be back soon.

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