The Karaite Jews of Cairo
When I first came to Cairo in order to study Arabic in the difficult period following the 1967 war, I was not sure what would await me as a Jew. I anticipated all kinds of questions about my absence from Saturday classes at the university, but the first question, put to me by one of my instructors, the aristocratic Mrs. Ragia Fahmy, was one I had never expected. She accepted my religious obligations without derision but inquired with friendly interest, "Are you a Karaite or Rabbanite?"

Not only had I never before had to identify myself as a Rabbanite Jew, but I was very surprised that she, a Moslem, knew about Karaites—the little-known Jewish sect dating from the eighth century C.E. which had rejected the binding nature of the Oral Law—and that she was familiar with the term Rabbanite, commonly used only by scholars to refer to the mainstream of Judaism.

It was difficult for me to couch my answer in contemporary terms when she asked me to explain the difference between myself and the Karaite physician who had been both family doctor and friend. Mrs. Fahmy’s questions brought me closer to the city, as perhaps nothing else could have, how much a part of Egyptian life the Karaites had been. After all, Cairo had been host to their community for over a thousand years.

During their first centuries in Egypt, the Karaites became prominent in commerce, banking, government service, and medicine as the centuries advanced, the doctrinal lines between Karaites and Rabbinites hardened, and the economic fortunes of both groups followed the general downswing in a country that was hostage to a succession of foreign rulers.

The present century, however, saw a new dynamism in the community, as many Karaites eagerly took advantage of modern educational opportunities. Karaite Jews made their mark on modern Egypt: Murad Farag Boy, lawyer, scholar, and the country’s most prolific Jewish author; Dr. Elie Lichaa, a leading ophthalmologist; Daoud Hosni, famed composer; and Baruch Lieto Barushi, jeweler to Cairo’s carriage trade.

Trit Karaites lived for centuries in their own section of the Harat al Yalud, Cairo’s medieval Jewish quarter, whose narrow and crowded lanes lie between the bustling markets of the Mousky and the fabed bazaars of the Khan el Khalili. Although the wealthier had begun to move out by the end of the 19th century, some remained until only a few years ago.

The haram (quarter of the Karaites) consisted of one long, winding street, together with seven or eight short alleyways that branched off from time to time. Here were found the synagogues, the office of the hakham al akbar (the group calls their chief rabbi), the Hebrew schools, the butcher shops, the bakeries, the foodstalls, and the coffeehouses that served this tight-knit—and tightly packed—society. Only a short walk away was the bazaar of the goldsmiths, the Saggah, where the majority of the men engaged in the manufacture and sale of jewelry and gold, handing down their skills from father to son, into the present century.

In Cairo today, Farag Murad Yehuda Menashe, a well-built man in his late twenties and the father of the city’s two youngest Jewish children, is the secretary and shochet of the Karaite community. He administers their properties and cemetery from his office next to the Musa Dar’s Synagogue (an imposing domed structure built in 1926 in Abbassia, a newer part of the city), whose exterior design is strongly reminiscent of the great Rabbanite Shaar Hashamayim Synagogue in downtown Cairo.

It is unlikely that the Rabbanite Jews of Cairo have ever stepped into Farag’s synagogue (which contains some of the most remarkable Jewish manuscript treasures in the world), although Farag has occasionally visited theirs. He celebrates one day of Rosh Hashana, and the Karaites, too; he says a Kippur this year occurred one day later than theirs; on Sukkot, he roves over the sukka in the synagogue courtyard with the Four Species mentioned in the Bible, but he has never held and blessed a lulav and etrog.

The dates of Farag’s Passover sometimes will not coincide with others, and he will read a Haggada based on Biblical texts, free of all Talmudic references. He will have no seker plate, no gourds, and no cups of wine. His Shavuot will always fall on a Sunday, and instead of observing the Ninth of Av, he will fast on the seventh and tenth. He has never heard the shofar blown, never put on tefillin, never affixed a mezuzah to the doorpost of his home, and never lit a hanukkiya. (Indeed, Hanukkah is totally absent from his calendar.)

For Farag, who is proud to identify himself as a Karaite Jew, is following in the tradition of his late father, a goldsmith and member of his community’s council, and of his father’s father. Today he is one of the 40 Karaites who remain in Cairo, which until mid-century was home to the largest single enclave of this group in the world. In 1948, approximately 7,000 of the city’s 42,000 Jews were Karaites.

Every Saturday morning at six o’clock, Farag will enter the synagogue to join the handful of other congregants for their four-hour Sabbath service. He has come with his two brothers, Musa, an engineering student at Cairo University, and Barakel, who is studying at a technical school. They greet another early arrival, Dr. Eli Marzouk, who has recently completed his course in dentistry at the university.

A few minutes later, the four are joined by Eli Massuda, the dedicated and active president of the

If you go...

TWA flies to Cairo daily. You can continue on to Israel via Athens on TWA. The Karaites who synagoge is in 23 Sebil el Khamis in the Abbassia district. Sabbath services begin at 6 in the morning and last until a bit after 10. Visitors are welcome. Remember to take your shoes off at the door. The Jewish community synagogue is on Adli Street in the main business district.
community, a retired senior government legal advisor, and by Barukh Lito Harun, a textile merchant in the Mousky, who serves as hazzan. Yusuf el Kudisi, owner of a plastics factory near the old Karaites synagogue in the Harat el Yehud, will arrive soon, as will several other older men, all goldsmiths, and five or six elderly women, some of whom live in newly constructed quarters behind the synagogue.

In the anteroom, they all remove their shoes. Each man takes his kippa and tallit, worn folded like a scarf, a blue thread glistening in each of its fringes. Upon entering the synagogue proper, each one kneels and prostrates himself in one flowing movement, before taking his place on the richly carpeted floor. They sit in a kneeling position, resting on their heels, their backs rammed straight, in carefully ordered rows. (The women are on one side, perhaps because the ladies' gallery that runs around three of the walls would seem too lonely for their tiny number.)

Everyone is facing the curtained Ark and the immediately adjacent large, raised bima, where the hazzan, his tallit fully open, will begin the responsive reading that is the characteristic form of their prayers. Their siddur consists almost entirely of Biblical passages and psalters composed by Karaites. Many of the prayers most familiar to the Rabbinic visitor—the Shemeneh Esi, the Kiddush, the Aleinu—are missing, and he will be surprised to note the strong penitential flavor of the liturgy, an embodiment of the Karaites' longing for Zion and their yearning for redemption.

W hen the Shema is read, the worshippers rise and extend their arms with palms outward, the men holding the tefilin before them. Later in the service, prior to the reading of the weekly portion, the Torah Scroll is opened and held up before the congregation, which again prostrates itself. Shortly after the hakara, the service concludes with the hazzan's words, "Shalom aleikhem. May your prayer be acceptable."

What will have most struck the visitor to this service? Perhaps its discipline, its sense of order, certainly the bowing or the unfamiliar (Please turn the page)
larity of the prayers themselves. He may wonder at its surface resemblance to services in a mosque, but in fact the Karaites service retains older forms of Jewish worship, since both prostration and raising of the hands were practiced until the destruction of the Second Temple. In the Karaites tradition, the service and mode of behavior, the great concern for the ritual cleanliness of the worshiper, echo the sanctity of the Temple ritual.

To Farag, as for the others, the morning must be full of memories: to his right, once sat his brother, now in Israel; to his left, was his uncle, now living in Baltimore. Parity dissipatiating the synagogue’s quiet and emptiness is the tiny congregation’s sense of being the guardian of an extraordinary assemblage of 20 priceless Bible codices, some of them gloriously illuminated, stored in a large safes in the building.

The pride of the collection is the Codex of the Prophets, completed by Moshe ben Asher in Tiberias in 985 C.E., the oldest dated Biblical manuscript extant. Plundered by the Crusaders from the synagogue of the Karaites in Jerusalem in 1099, it was redeemed a few years later and entrusted to the Cairo community.

When Columbia University orientalist Richard Gottesman was privileged to see the Karaites collection in 1905, he wrote: “They were the most magnificent specimens of the Hebrew penman’s hand that I have ever set eyes on. One stands before some of these venerable monuments with feelings not unlike awe; immense masses of parchment, the pages ranging from twenty to fifty centimeters (7.9 to 19.7 inches) in height. Think of the love, the reverence, the sacredness that are here embodied.”

But he went on with considerably less enthusiasm to describe the tightly fitting box into which the Ben Asher codex was stuffed and the condition of the other codices, as well as that of the Arabic documents, which are of the utmost historical value. The privileged modern visitor shares his awe, and also his concern for their preservation under more favorable conditions.

An antiquity of a very different order is the Karaites cemetery at Ja-
satin, southeast of Old Cairo. Thanks to the walls that enclose some of its sections, it is in better repair than the vast and tragically devastated Rabbanite cemetery that borders it. The community leaders have tried to fend off vandals and land developers but have had only partial success.

Their geographical compactness and intricate nexus of family relationships, the rich scholarship of their early centuries, the “collective memory” of their long

SABBATH MORNING SERVICES begin early at Cairo’s imposing Main Dar El Synagogue (6 A.M.) and differ from Rabbanite practice in a number of ways. Upon entering, worshippers remove their shoes and then pray kneeling, facing Jerusalem, in ordered rows on a richly carpeted floor. If one is called up for an aliya, he first kneels, with forehead touching the ground, before the Ark (above). When the Shema is recited, arms are outstretched to display the tallit and then the tefillot are held horizontally in front of the eyes to fulfill the verse, “And it shall be unto you for a hearing, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the Lord” (Num. 15:39). The arms are outstretched too when reciting “Lift up your hands in holiness, and bless ye the Lord” (Ps. 134:2). At the end of the service, the weekly Torah portion is read by hazzan and acting hakham Baniak Lieto Harun (below).
The Karaites retained their identity in the face of radical challenge and change.

Egyptian heritage, life in a country where the individual's status was largely determined by his religious denomination and where he was subject to his own religious courts—all these factors help us to understand how this small band of "different" Jews survived in Cairo for so many generations, and how today, the Karaites still retain that identity in the face of radical challenge and change.

But none of the reasons we have suggested would have been enough to ensure survival without the sustenance of faith.

When Karaites first came to Egypt some time during the ninth century, they were representatives of a sect that had spread from Persia and Iraq and which under a process of consolidation and refinement over the next few centuries. Its followers rapidly spread westward to Palestine and through the Jewish settlements in Syria, Egypt, and Byzantium, even penetrating for a time as far west as Spain and Morocco and even to the Sahara, deep in the Algerian Sahara.

The Jerusalem Karaites were strong enough for a few centuries to vie with the Rabbanites there for mastery, but the community was brought to an abrupt end by the First Crusade in 1099. Leadership of the sect then passed to Cairo and Byzantium, with the latter gradually gaining primacy. From there, it expanded into the Crimea (ca. 1200) and later into Lithuania and Poland (ca. 1400). The Golden Age of Karaitism, in the tenth and eleventh centuries, saw it at its greatest strength in influence and creativity. Despite later periods of intense cultural activity, it never afterwards posed a serious threat to Rabbanite Judaism.

What were the beliefs of this Jewish sect, which is the only one of the ancient Jewish sects to survive until the present day? The Karaites trace their ideas to the days of the First Temple, and many authorities note their links to other schismatic tendencies in Jewish thought. The early leaders, including the eighth century Anan ben David, honored by the Karaites as their founder, denied the divine origin of Oral Law and the post-Biblical tradition formulated in the Talmud.

The new sect insisted upon a return to the study of the Scriptures as the basis for Jewish practice; and its members took the name Karaim, Bible readers, while they labeled their opponents Rabbanim, followers of the rabbis of the Talmud. Aside from the crucial negation of the Oral Law, Karaitism departed very little from the doctrines of normative Judaism, accepting the divine origin of the Scriptures and messianic redemption.

Karaites practices, some of which we have noted earlier, differed much more, especially with regard to dietary laws (where it added to the laws of ritual slaughter but did not accept the Rabbinic rules of meat and milk separation), Sabbath observance (where it prohibited any use of fire, even if kindled before nightfall), calendation (where it insisted on direct sighting of the new moon and rejected mathematical calculation), and the critical area of matrimonial law (where it greatly expanded the prohibited degrees of kinship, devised its own marriage and divorce procedures, and determined the religious status of the child according to the religion of the father). Conflict with the Rabbanites often resulted from these as well as other divergencies in practice, most of which derived from the basic premise of the sect.

Although Karaitism was never a monolithic movement, and in fact was beset by much internal controversy, by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries its men of learning had evolved a body of tradition and code of law, with scholars in Constantinople gradually modifying certain of the original usages. They formulated a less stringent definition of prohibited marriages, permitted the kindling of fire before the Sabbath to serve as a source of light (thereby lifting the curtain of darkness that had covered their quarters on Friday nights), and accepted a compromise on mathematically setting the calendar. During this period and subsequent centuries, the Egyptian community generally followed the more conservative school of Karaitism thought, often adopting reforms only after a lag of several hundred years.

In Cairo, "mixed marriages" between Karaites and Rabbanites, at first accepted in even the highest social circles, became increasingly frowned upon by both groups, especially after the arrival of Maimonides in Cairo in 1165. While the Rabbanite authorities began to require that the Karaites be excluded from marriage in order to prevent marriage, the Karaites continued into one of almost total rejection of intermarriage.

The exact relationship of Karaitism to mainstream Judaism has often been raised. It is not merely a theoretical question, but one which has generated new debate in modern Israel, where the majority of Cairo's Karaites relocated after the rise of the Jewish State. In striking contrast to the Karaites of nineteenth century Russia, who sought to win greater civil liberties from the Czarist Government by disassociating themselves from Jewry, the Karaites of the Near East always regarded themselves as part of the Jewish people and were invariably so considered by both their Rabbanite counterparts and by the Moslem authorities who held sway over the two denominations. Despite periods of friction and outbursts of antagonism, the two groups managed to coexist harmoniously enough in Cairo itself. There the Karaites shared the fate of Egypt's Jewry in times of tolerance and in times of persecution. (Please turn the page)
THE KARAITES IN ISRAEL

By LEAH ABRAMOWITZ

THE KARAITES of Israel, most of whom came from Cairo, dedicate two new Torah scrolls in their centuries-old Jerusalem synagogue.

In Jerusalem's Old City, we're used to ceremonies and religious processions, but this was an especially festive affair. At Hol Hamoed Sukkot we watched a huge, ecstatic crowd of three hundred Karaita men and women conduct two beautifully decorated, round Sephardic Torah scrolls through their newly-renovated synagogue right opposite our bedroom window.

The Karaita synagogue, probably the oldest Jewish house of prayer in Jerusalem, dates back to the tenth or eleventh century, according to the historian. A Karaita legend, however, credits its establishment to Anan ben David, the founder of the sect. There are ancient inscriptions on the walls which refer back many generations to early benefactors.

It was not the synagogue's age, however, that impressed my kids, but its location deep down in the bowels of the earth, more than 22 feet below the level of the courtyard where we watched the Torah dedication ceremony.

Did the early Karaites build their synagogue underground to fulfill the verse: "from the depths, I called to You" (Psalms 130:1)? Or was it a necessary accommodation to religious persecution and oppression? No one knows for sure.

Today, to reach the synagogue one descends 23 narrow steps which lead down a decorative trough. Worshipers must remove their shoes before entering the synagogue proper and wash their feet there. The central hall itself is unadorned except for rich, colorful wall-to-wall rugs which cover the floor. Even benches and chairs are plain.

LEAH ABRAMOWITZ, a medical social worker from St. Louis, has lived in Jerusalem's Old City since July 1973. She wrote "We Moved to the Old City" in our January 1975 issue.

The year is 1948: Karaita Jews, now relatively prosperous and well-educated, were experiencing a virtual explosion of intellectual and communal activity. Throughout the Arab countries of the Middle East, the birth of the State of Israel came with the force of a tidal wave into the homes of local Jewish residents.

In Cairo, the wave of anti-Israel demonstrations that hit the city made no distinction between the Rabbanites and Karaites. On June 20, 1948, a bomb thrown into the Karaita house caused serious loss of life. In that same year, the first Exodus of Karaita Jews from Egypt, as some one thousand of them made their way to Israel. This was an exodus motivated only in part by fear of forced conversion, and also spurred by a deeply-felt desire to return to the Jewish homeland, whose rebuilding the Karaites viewed as a holy duty.

In the early 1950's, the prospects for life-as-usual in Egypt did not seem hopeful to most of the Jews who remained there. As the decade progressed, events became more and more ominous. One event had its beginnings some 20 years earlier in the Karaita home.

Growing up in the 1930's, in the northern end of this quarter, was a young Musarite boy, tour of whose dreams, to leave those tenement years spent in an apartment on Rue d'Arts, close to the post office which his father supervised and within earshot of the Karaita synagogue. He was probably the only Musarite family in the quarter, living in a building owned by Karaita Jews.

The landlords, the Yaakov and Sara Shalom family, befriended the lonely young man, who, when he was not busy organizing student marches to protest British policies in Palestine, spent many hours in their apartment, as a guest at the table and a companion of their son.

The Suez War of 1956—accompanied by arrests and deportations—precipitated the second and much larger wave of emigration to Israel. The final stage in the Karaita exodus followed the Six-Day War.

In Israel, the Karaites, almost all of Egyptian origin, now claim 20,000 adherents, although other estimates range as low as 10,000. The community, which once was exceptions to the Korban, has been dispersed throughout the greater Ramle (the largest center), the moshavim of Matzlij and Rannen, Ashdod, Okfim, and other places. Paradoxically, the return to Zion has raised new questions for the group. In Cairo, even the less observant had at least identified themselves as Karaites, but in Israel came a reexamination of their collective identity, in a nation of Rabbanite Jews, the members experience a new sense of isolation.

They receive financial support from the Government through their religious, educational, and communal programs and are served by an energetic national council. They have built new houses of worship, recently restored the synagogue in Harani in the Old City of Jerusalem, and have printed their prayerbooks and many classical Karaita works. The older generation and the leadership (all the chief hakhamim, including the incumbent, the 81-year-old David ben Moshe Yuddalm, were active in Cairo) are dedicated to transmitting their carefully-nur
tured heritage to the younger generation, some of whom seem less than eager to accept the yoke of their tradition.

The late Chief Hakham Shlomo Nunu summed up the difficulties in a statement in their monthly magazine, Dover Bnei Mikra: “In Egypt, we were a foreign minority in relation to the whole population. This bound us together and united us around Judaism. In Israel, we are living in our own country, but we found here a secular culture that is strange to us. Unlimited freedom has changed our attitudes towards our values.”

Perhaps the most crucial problem facing the sect as a whole in Israel is that the standing of its religious court and its jurisdiction in matters of personal status remain in a kind of legal limbo. “We had our own court in Egypt until 1955 when the Government abolished the communal courts,” explains one of their leaders, “but in Israel we cannot get full recognition! The present confusing situation seems to find their clergy’s right to perform marriages accepted, but the validity of the divorces denied. Following years of debate that included a report by a blue-ribbon Government commission, September 1978 found the frustrated Karaite national council demanding recognition as a religious community, a move that would facilitate the winning of legal status for their courts.

Political and rabbinical authorities have been reluctant to grant such a request in the past for fear that approval would institutionalize what they consider “a tragic rift in our people.” For the Karaites, the issue at bottom is one of group survival.

Not all of Cairo’s Karaites settled in Israel. Additional outposts of Egyptian Karaites exist today in the United States, France, Switzerland, Canada, Brazil, England, and Australia. Thousands of Russian Karaites, their exact number unknown, still live in the Soviet Union, and about two hundred Karaites remain in Turkey.

In the United States, more than five hundred Karaites from Egypt have made their homes in San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, Providence, Baltimore and Rochester. The Chicago Karaites were fortunate to be led by Jacques Mangoubi, president of the Cairo community until his departure from Egypt in 1966. An ebullient and outspoken man even in his seventies, he remained active in his religion’s behalf until his death in 1976. A year earlier, he had incorporated the local group as the “Jewish Karaite Community of America.”

This fall, Karaites held High Holy Day services in San Francisco, Chicago, and Baltimore, observing the dates of the standard Jewish calendar. The thoughts of the congregants, who were largely middle-aged and older, must have turned to the times when their numbers filled to overflowing their own capacious synagogues.

T he Karaites in the United States are well-educated, among them an erudite doctor who was physician to the last king of Libya, a former high-ranking government lawyer, and a recently retired Cairo University physics professor. There are also a large number of practicing physicians and engineers, and they have imparted their values to their children. A great-grandson of a Chief Hakham of Cairo, who came to this country at the age of sixteen, is an alumnus of Phillips Andover Academy and of MIT, where he is now working for an advanced degree. Another young Karaite follows the no-less-honored trade of his father, a goldsmith and jeweler. In respect to their religious heritage, however, it seems clear that it will be very hard for them to withstand the pressures to merge with the mainstream of Jewry.

Still, they speak with pride of their community’s history, take part in one another’s simchas, and with their innate courtesy and warmth welcome the researcher into their homes. “We are Karaites,” say we, “we are Talmudists,” one dignified gentleman told me, “but I hope you realize that we are very old Jews. We are friends and should remain so.”

They recall their lives in Egypt with an affection that is mixed with rueful recollections of the last years and days. Karaites Cairo lives in their memories.

Cairo is a city but empty of its Karaites now. Even though the prospects of peace suggest the likelihood of a continuing communal presence, it is doubtful that Cairo will ever regain a substantial Karaite population. The future of the Egyptian Karaites now lies in Israel, where a new page in their history is being written.