

## **A Barley Believable Calendar Dispute**

This year the leap day 29 February fell on the intercalary month Adar I of the Jewish calendar. Both 2016 and its *anno mundi* counterpart 5776 are intercalated (having extra periods of time inserted into them) but the two calendars do it differently. Instead of having an extra day every four years, the Jewish calendar adds a 30-day month every two or three years bringing the shorter lunar year in sync with the seasons.

From the eighth century onwards Rabbanite Jews have followed a fixed cycle of intercalations in which seven months are added over nineteen years. Not so the Karaites, whose ideal - rooted in a biblical precept - is to intercalate the year by observing the ripening of barley in the Land of Israel. This ideal was not always attainable: reports on the state of the barley crops in Palestine, easily available today, were often inaccessible to medieval Karaite communities further afield.

When empirical intercalation was practiced, it led to calendar discrepancies between Karaites and Rabbanites. One such occasion is noted in a betrothal deed from eleventh-century Egypt dated "Thursday, the ninth day of the month Shevat, which is the month Adar in the year of a discrepancy between the [Rabbanite and Karaite] communities" (T-S 20.42). In such years holidays were celebrated one month apart by the two groups. In a mixed Karaite–Rabbanite marriage this could seriously impact daily life, especially so at Passover when one spouse would remove leaven bread and the other would still use it. Unsurprisingly, all mixed marriage contracts contained a clause that ensured festivals were respected according to both calendars.

Calendar discrepancies sometimes resulted in violence, as is attested by an eleventh-century letter written by a Byzantine Rabbanite to his brother in Egypt (T-S 20.45):

As you know, my dear brother, the Karaites assaulted us again last year and desecrated the festivals of the Lord. They celebrated the New Year in the eighth month, for they have received letters from Palestine to the effect that no ripe barley was sighted in Nisan. Consequently, their Passover was celebrated in Iyyar... Now, a violent enmity has developed between us and great quarrels have taken place.

Authorities seem to have sympathised with the Karaites, punishing Rabbanite trouble-makers by imposing a heavy tax of nearly 1000 dinars upon the Rabbanite community.

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