

The History of a Karaite Rabbi in Eastern Europe

The story of Simhah Isaac Lutski helps explain how Karaite Jews retained their communal and doctrinal coherence amid other competing, more 'European' forms of Judaism

By [Daniel J. Lasker](#) | March 21, 2017 12:00 AM



In a little town in 18th-century Eastern Europe, there was a Jewish rabbi who eked out a living mostly as a *melamed* for little children. Life was difficult; in fact, in one month — Adar, 1743 — both his father and his son died. In addition to teaching, the rabbi tried to supplement his income by writing his own books of theology, biblical exegesis, law, and history. Even though the printing press had existed for almost 300 years, the potential audience for his works was so small that it did not make financial sense to print them; instead, he distributed his books by making multiple handwritten copies of them. In addition, he copied manuscripts of other people's compositions, hoping to sell them to interested co-religionists. When he couldn't find a buyer, he took one of the more expensive and elaborate manuscripts to the local pawnbroker; that manuscript was redeemed by his brother only after the scribe's death. Finally, however, his scholarship was recognized and he was offered a lucrative position running a yeshiva in a community far away from his home city, invited by the local *gevir*. He relocated, but his patron soon died. While he continued to live and work in his new community, he never felt at home, complaining of being in exile and getting into arguments with his new neighbors. Finally, in 1760, he died at age 44, having composed around 24 books during his short life. He never returned to his native city; he was buried in the local cemetery, and then almost forgotten.

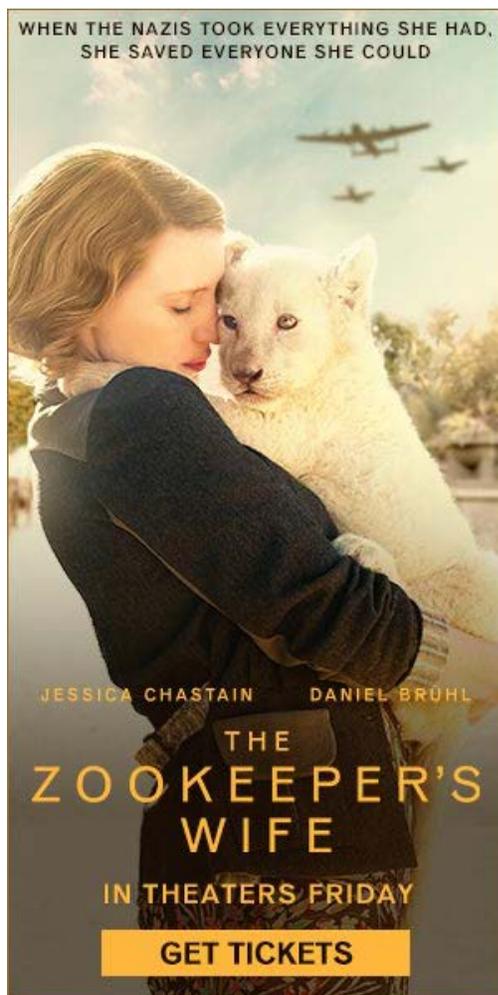
This melancholy story might not have been very remarkable if the unfortunate rabbi had not been Simhah Isaac Lutski, the most erudite Karaite in the 18th century. His birthplace was Lutsk in Volhynia, then a city in Poland and now in northwest Ukraine with a population of over 200,000. His new home and burial place was in Chufut-Kale ("The Jews' Fortress"), a medieval city-fortress in the Crimean Mountains that has been reduced to ruins. The cemetery where he was buried still exists, with a treasure trove of important tombstones, including those of Lutski and his wife, Bat-Sheva. His literary output, those approximately 24 books composed in his very short life, is noteworthy for its breadth of learning and diverse subject matter. And, in an act most unusual for a Karaite, he devoted a quarter of those books to Kabbalah, the epitome of Rabbinical Judaism's mystical doctrines. So what was an impoverished, Karaite Kabbalist doing teaching children, writing books, and copying manuscripts in mid-18th-century Eastern Europe?

In order to understand Lutski's background, it is first necessary to know how [Karaites](#) arrived in Eastern Europe, with centers in Crimea, Volhynia, Galicia, and Lithuania (most notably the city of Troki/Trakai). Karaism began as a separate, recognizable Jewish movement in the Islamic Middle East in the ninth century or so (the eighth-century Anan ben David, who is often credited with founding the group, was only later adopted by the Karaites as one of their own), and had its heyday in the Golden Age in the Land of Israel in the 10th and 11th centuries. By the time the Crusader conquest of 1099 destroyed the Jewish communities in the Land of Israel, both Karaite and Rabbanite (the name for rabbinic Jews in the context of Karaism), there were already well-established Karaite communities in Byzantium (today's Turkey) and Egypt. By the late 14th century, Karaites were to be found in select areas of Eastern Europe. In the 18th-century, the Karaites there were a distinct, intellectually active even if numerically rather minor, segment of the Jewish population.

Throughout the centuries, Karaites maintained an alternate form of Judaism, one that denied the validity of the



Rabbinic “Oral Torah” as embodied in the Talmud. They were not necessarily literalist interpreters of the Torah, as is often believed; rather, they used many of the same exegetical techniques as did the Rabbanites but came to different conclusions. Thus, Karaites maintained a different liturgical calendar; had their own dietary laws (which generally allowed consumption of milk and meat together); observed the laws of purity and impurity, including menstrual separation, in their own manner; prayed from a distinct prayer book while either genuflecting or sitting on the floor of their chair-less synagogues after removing their shoes; and retained alternate marital and consanguinity laws, making intermarriage with Rabbanites problematic. But with all this they were considered by themselves, by the Rabbanites, and by non-Jews as members of the Jewish community.



Simhah Isaac Lutski's headstone in Chufut-Kale. (Photo courtesy Daniel J. Lasker Collection)

Over the centuries, Karaites made an invaluable contribution to Jewish culture, especially in the formative period under Islam, when they authored original biblical commentaries, Hebrew grammars, legal guides, and theological treatises. They were never a fully independent form of Judaism, and their intellectual achievements were usually developed in response to Rabbinic Judaism, showing greater or lesser reliance on the literature of the competing Rabbanites. As the centuries passed, and their minority status was fully established, Karaites practiced a form of rapprochement with their brethren without giving up entirely on their own unique form of Judaism. This included certain legal reforms, such as permission to light previously forbidden candles before the Sabbath without a blessing and changing the cycle of Torah readings to correspond to the Rabbanite procedure. Classical Karaite thought, which had its origins in Islamic theology but was later modified in light of Maimonidean Aristotelianism, was almost indistinguishable from the traditional Rabbanite belief system concerning God, divine justice, and the afterlife. Karaite views of Hebrew grammar gave way to standard Rabbanite understandings, and later Karaite exegetes were more likely to cite Rabbanites such as Abraham Ibn Ezra than their own classical commentators, like Yefet ben Eli (who, himself, is often cited approvingly by Ibn Ezra). Karaites justified study of the Talmud and its use for inspiration by the claim that “most of the Talmudic statements are the words of our ancestors.” Somewhat ironically, they started calling their own spiritual leaders “rabbis.”

This brings us back to Simhah Isaac Lutski, scion of a long line of Karaite adepts, who could trace his lineage back through seven generations and over 150 years. He was an expert in Karaite literature, providing extensive bibliographical lists in two of his books. He wrote treatises devoted to specific Karaite subjects, such as the calendar, and commentaries on classical Karaite literary works. Yet at the same time he was also very familiar with Rabbanite literature, citing among others Isaac Abravanel, Isaac Arama, Gersonides, Joseph Albo, Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Judah Halevi, Moses Narboni, Samuel Zarza, Shemariah ben Elijah Ikriti, Profiat Duran, Joseph Yavetz, Joseph Del Medigo (Yashar of Candia), and Judah Moscatto. Lutski was also not averse to citing non-Jewish sources, both Greek and Roman philosophers (including Plato, Aristotle, and Seneca), and Arab authorities (including al-Ghazali and al-Tabrizi). Lutski unhesitatingly adopted Maimonides' admonition

to “accept the truth from whatever source.”

What is of special interest is Lutski’s intellectual profile. It should be remembered that Lutski’s Jewish contemporaries in mid-18th-century Eastern Europe included such important Rabbanite figures as the founder of Hasidism, Israel Baal Shem Tov, located not too far from Lutsk in Medžibož in Ukraine; Israel of Zamosć, another erudite Polish Jew, who was exposed to modern science when he moved to Berlin from his native Zamosć and returned to Brody (the latter two cities are close to Lutsk); and Moses Mendelssohn, a German Jew fully at home in the Enlightenment. Lutski shared Baal Shem Tov’s interest in Kabbalah, but was hardly an ecstatic Hasid; he knew about modern science, with its heliocentric world and atomic theory, but rejected it as speculative; and he was light years away from the Berlin Enlightenment. Living in the mid-18th century, Lutski was, in many senses, a quintessential medieval Jew in terms of his religious outlook.

In one of his earliest books, Lutski attempts to prove creation of the world and the existence, incorporeality, and unity of God. He does so by using an eclectic collection of 42 propositions, all well-attested in medieval physics and metaphysics. Employing these propositions, Lutski goes on to demonstrate the basic tenets of traditional theology. Thus, the motions of the spheres around the Earth are invoked as proof of the need for an unmoved mover, one whose existence is necessary and not merely possible. As the necessary existent, God can have no external causes and must be one and incorporeal. The impossibility of an infinite chain of causes and effects means the world was created. There are actually three created worlds: 1) intellects, also known as angels; 2) spheres, composed of a special matter; and 3) the sublunar world, made up of four elements that conjoin in various combinations of matter and form. This is the world of Aristotle and Ptolemy, not Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton. There is nothing, or almost nothing, in this book of theology that could not have been written 400 years earlier.

Lutski’s rationalism was relatively moderate, and he even wrote that some of his Karaite predecessors who adopted less traditional views had been influenced by “the uncircumcised Greek philosophers.” After Lutski had discovered Kabbalah, he opined that Maimonides himself would not have followed the Greek philosophers, who were uncircumcised in both body and spirit, if he had seen the *Zohar* before he wrote *The Guide of the Perplexed*. And it is in the field of Kabbalah that Lutski made his most distinctive contribution to Karaite thought.

Kabbalah had not been shunned by Karaites completely before Lutski, but it was generally far from their world view. Early Karaites attacked Rabbanites for nonrational aspects of Rabbinic Judaism, including fantastic *midrashim*, which seemed to imply divine corporeality; beliefs and practices that might be considered superstitious; numerology; astrology; and anything that seemed to border on the mystical. Yet, as Karaites became closer to Rabbanites, and as Kabbalah became dominant among the latter, some Karaites were attracted to mystical ideas as well. The major influence on both Rabbanite and Karaite Kabbalah in the 17th and 18th centuries was Rabbi Isaac Luria of Safed (Ari, 1534-1572).

Lutski claimed it was difficult for him to learn Kabbalah because Rabbanites refused to teach him or to lend him their books. He saw his own work as being developed according to his own humble efforts despite his inadequacies: “For I have not learned the true knowledge of the Kabbalah from a teacher or instructor and I do not know the opinion of the holy, divine kabbalists, since I have not seen most of their major compositions and books. I have spoken only that which God has placed in my mouth through the reasoning of my limited comprehension.” Despite this disclaimer, Lutski cited in his books such Kabbalistic sources as the *Zohar*, *Tikkunei Zohar*, *Sefer Yetzirah*, the works of Moses Cordovero, “and all the writings of the Holy Ari, may his memory be for life in the World to Come.” What is most remarkable is Lutski’s claim that the Kabbalah was given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai as part of divine revelation and transmitted orally from generation to generation (thus the name “Kabbalah,” tradition). Lutski, the Karaite, was not ready to accept a Sinaitic legal Oral Torah that complemented the laws of the Written Torah, but he did believe in an oral mystical tradition. According to Lutski, if it had not been for the vicissitudes of Jewish life over the centuries, the Jewish people would not have lost this reliable tradition and it would not have become restricted to a select few. The non-Kabbalists among both the Karaites and Rabbanites were not to be blamed for their ignorance of this divine wisdom.

To bridge the gap of mystical knowledge among his Karaite co-religionists, Lutski wrote six compositions fully dedicated to Kabbalah, explaining Lurianic concepts to his contemporaries and arguing for the validity of this extra-biblical source of knowledge for Karaites. In a number of other works there are either references to, or justifications of, Kabbalah. Lutski’s Kabbalistic presentations were not particularly original, offering elementary explanations of the various worlds, the *sefirot*, the divine names, the letters of the Hebrew language, and other Kabbalistic concepts. One book, for instance, is dedicated to an explanation of the relation of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the 10 Kabbalistic *sefirot*, with an analysis of each letter’s meaning and even its shape. Lutski’s innovation was in his attempt at making Kabbalah acceptable and accessible to Karaites, but even here he was incapable of fully integrating the two realms, which he might have done, for instance, by

giving Kabbalistic reasons for the commandments as understood by Karaism (mirroring standard Kabbalah's mystical explanations of Rabbanite practices). Occasionally, Lutski even slips and records specifically Rabbanite concepts in his Kabbalistic presentations, demonstrating the artificiality of his project. He was an eclectic popularizer of Kabbalah, not an original practitioner.

When reviewing Lutski's oeuvre and life, two questions stand out: Who was his intended audience? And what would they have made of his writings? Although Lutski himself was firmly entrenched in the Rabbanite cultural environment, his intended readers were undoubtedly Karaites, since very few Rabbanites would be interested in works that were rooted in Karaism. His potential Karaite readers were loyal to Karaite religious practices, but perhaps they were unsure of their own theology. Lutski attempted to win over such readers to his vision of Karaite religious truth as he understood it, namely, a philosophical theology complemented by a deep commitment to the Lurianic world view. But what did his readers think? Did the typical 18th-century Eastern European Karaite accept Lutski's medieval theology as well as his great reliance on Rabbanite sources, including Kabbalah?

In order to understand Lutski's literary project, it is important first to remember that he did not work in a vacuum, creating his literature *ex nihilo*, as it were. By the 16th century, Eastern European Karaism had developed an important albeit small community of intellectuals, who, although generally ignored in accounts of both Karaism and Jewish intellectual history, shared many of the same concerns and methodologies as Simhah Isaac Lutski. Rabbanite works were considered a valid and legitimate source of Jewish knowledge. Thus, Lutski was part and parcel of the Karaite intellectual heritage of Eastern Europe, seeing himself as an important link in the Karaite chain of tradition. This is undoubtedly one reason why he concluded his bibliographical studies of Karaite literature with lists of his own compositions.

Even if the Karaite masses were not interested in Lutski's literary output, it would seem that he anticipated that he would find an erudite audience, as small as it were, who had been prepared by his predecessors to be receptive to his books. Lutski's scholarship must have been prized in the Karaite community, because he both attracted students to his classes and was praised effusively by his contemporaries. Lutski reciprocated by engaging in many educational projects. Not only did he write close to 24 books on various subjects, but also taught in Karaite schools and copied rare Karaite manuscripts. He constantly repeated himself in his written works so as to make sure his points were understood by his readers. Certainly, Lutski believed he had an audience of educated, or educable, Karaites who could read sophisticated compositions written in the classical Hebrew style (with a good admixture of Rabbinic aphorisms and expressions), and who could understand references to spheres and intellects, matter and form, divine attributes and necessary existence. Presumably, Lutski's readers were no more exposed to or willing to accept modern science than he was. His conservative philosophical theology, based on medieval science, would be unobjectionable to most Karaites, who would have had no alternative theological system with which to replace the medieval system. For Lutski, however, the medieval philosophical world view is not sufficient; it must be supplemented by Lurianic Kabbalah. Here, again, his readers would probably be unprepared to challenge the details of this theological system, even if they were uncomfortable with his adoption of Kabbalah that was so closely identified with Rabbanism.

We have no way of judging the success of Lutski's literary project. He was praised by contemporaries, and no one, to my knowledge, attempted to refute his philosophical or theological views. His manuscripts were copied abundantly by later generations. Nonetheless, very few Karaite authors after Lutski shared his intellectual interests and his theological worldview. He apparently was the last great Karaite scholar in Eastern Europe, and his generation was one of the last Eastern European Karaite generations that were situated firmly in the Jewish intellectual milieu. It was not long before Russian Karaites convinced first the czars, and then themselves, that they were not part of the larger Jewish enterprise, leading eventually in the 20th century to a denial of any Jewish identity all together (although contemporary Egyptian Karaites, most of whom have relocated in Israel, most definitely see themselves as part of the Jewish people). In contrast, no one reading Simhah Isaac Lutski's work would ever think this was not a Jewish author writing for a Jewish audience in a Jewish milieu. Unfortunately, the type of Karaite communities in Eastern Europe for whom he originally wrote either do not exist or are no longer able to appreciate his efforts. These glorious Karaite Jewish communities of the past, which could produce an intellectual like Simhah Isaac Lutski, are no longer.

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