

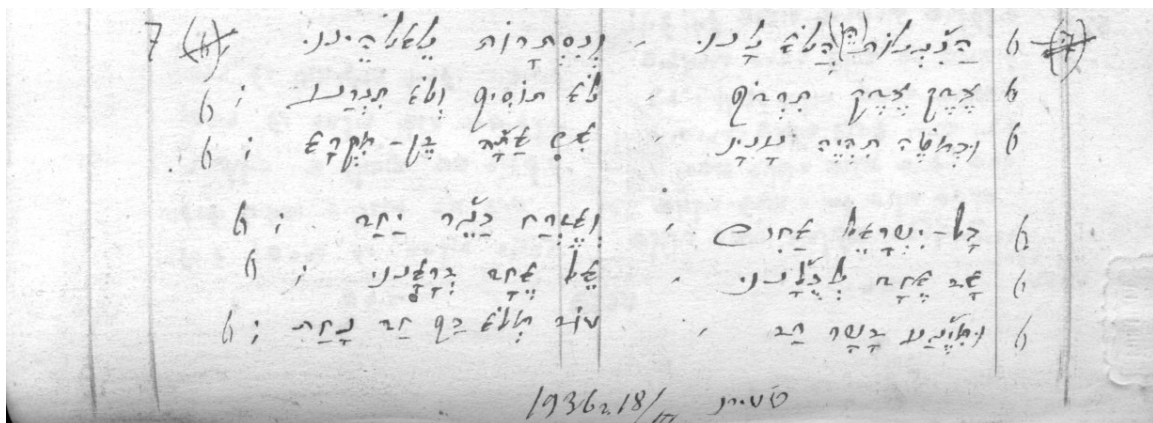
A Hebrew Poem by Ḥakham Shabetai Ben-Mordekhai Tiro and Crimean Karaite Jewish Identity in the 20th Century

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In 2001 a bookseller contacted me to help him identify a Karaite manuscript that he had acquired. The manuscript turned out to be a Diwan containing 475 pages of Türküler [poems/songs] in Karaite Judæo-Tatar (with a heavy Turkish influence, which became common in the late 19th-early 20th centuries) written by Ḥakham Mordekhai Ben-Yiṣḥaq Tiro between the mid-19th century and the turn of the 20th century. There were also a few written in Hebrew by his son Ḥakham Shabetai Ben-Mordekhai who lived in Gözlöw [Yevpatoria] from 1861-1939. One particular six line poem written by Ḥakham Shabetai in Hebrew and dated 18 March 1936 completely goes against the myth fostered by Seraja Szapszal and the apostate Mikhail Semenovich Sarach (who strongarmed the Trakai community to remove the Hebrew Decalogue from the synagogue and replace it with a Qaray translation in Latin letters, wanted the Gözlöw community to remove all traces of Hebrew inscriptions from the synagogue, and insisted on inserting the Christian “Lord’s Prayer” into the Latin script Qaray language *Siddur* printed in Lithuania) that Crimean Karaites are not Jews but Khazars, Komans, or some other Turks.

Here we find that, a year after the Nazis enacted the first of the infamous Nuremburg Laws and a scant three years before Stalin’s rapprochement with Hitler, a Crimean Karaite Ḥakham wrote, contrary to the official state position on Karaites, that Karaites are Jews.

This attitude is consistent with that expressed in all the Hebrew writings of the Karaite *Ḥakhamim* up to early 20th century, while, at the same time, writing in Russian for external consumption the myth about Khazar, Koman, or other Turkic origin.



The text reads:

ונסתרות לאלהינו:
לא תוסיף ולא תגרע:
אם אתה בן-מקרא:
ואזרח כגר יחד:
אל אחד בראנו:
טוב מלא כף חד נחת:

הנגלות הן הלא לנו
צדק צדק תרדף
וכמשה תהיה עניו
כל-ישראל אחים
אב אחד לכלנו
ומיגע בשר רב

Translation:

Behold the revealed things are ours
And the hidden things are God's
Righteousness, righteousness shall you pursue
You shall not add nor shall you subtract
And like Moses shall you be humble
If you are a Karaite
All Israel are brothers
Both native born and proselyte
We all have one father
One God created us
And more than the great labour of flesh
Better is one handful of quietness.