

## Role of the Hakham in Karaite Judaism

By

Yochanan Zaqantov

Karaite Judaism distinguishes itself by the motto “Study well the Scriptures, and rely not on another’s opinion”. Given this each Karaite Jew must be knowledgeable of what is written down for us by Moshe our Prophet (HaTorah), The Prophets (Nevi'im), and the Wise Writings (Khethuvim) documented in what we call the Tanakh or Miqra. Yet, with the responsibility is also the realization that each of us has been given gifts from our Elohim. Some have ability to study and understand the written words of Elohim. Some have the gift of writing words in prose, poetry, and songs. Some have an ability to play music and write music. None is better or worst but simply different.

Within the Tanakh, the term Hakham is used to denote someone wise, a sage, or knowledgeable. One who has studied and learned the craft or attained knowledge of a specific area.

Chakham/Hakham is חָכָם (Chet-Kaf-Mem) which is reference number 2450. It is an adjective from the verb Chakham/Hakham חָכַם (Chet-Kaf-Mem) which is reference number 2449. It is generally referred to a wise person. There is also a feminine form of the word in Hebrew. Chokh'mah/Chakh'mah is חֲכָמָה (Chet-Kaf-Mem-Hey) which is reference number 2451. Lastly, reference number 2452 is the Aramaic feminine noun which is spelled the same as reference number 2451 but is only found in Ezra and Daniel. There are other related words but we will not cover them for this study.

First, let us establish the meaning of the verb Chakham in the Miqra.

Shemot/Exodus 1:10

9 He said to his people: Here, (this) people, the Children of Israel, is many-more and mightier (in number) than we! 10 Come-now, **let us use-our-wits (nit'chak'mah נִתְחַכְמָה)** against it, lest it become many-more, and then, if war should occur, it too be added to our enemies and make war upon us or go up away from the land! 11 So they set gang-captains over it, to afflict it with their burdens. It built storage-cities for Pharaoh-Pitom and Ra'amses. 12 But as they afflicted it, so did it become many, so did it burst forth. And they felt dread before the Children of Israel.

Here we see the verb here demonstrates that they want to deal in a way that would be wise to them given the strength in numbers the Children of Israel/Benei Yisrael were in comparison. To make the right choices for them.

Devarim/Deuteronomy 32:29

28 For a nation straying from counsel are they, in them there is no understanding. 29 If (only) **they were wise (chakh'mu חַכְמוּ)**, they would contemplate this, they would understand their future! 30 How can one pursue a thousand, two put a myriad to flight, unless their Rock had sold them out, YHVH had handed them over? 31 For not like their rock is our Rock, though our enemies so-assess-it; indeed, from the vine of Sedom is their vine, 32 from the fields of Amora, their grapes are grapes of poison, clusters bitter for them, 33 the hot-venom of serpents their wine, the cruel poison of vipers.

This lament was part of the Song of Moshe that was to remind them that they had a a Rock who would uphold them and by recognizing that they would be considered wise.

Melekhim Aleph/I Kings 4:31 (5:11)

4:29/5:9 YHVH endowed Shlomo/Solomon with **wisdom (chakh'mah - 2451 חַכְמָה)** and discernment in great measure, with understanding as vast as the sands on the seashore.

10 Shlomo's/Solomon's **wisdom (chakh'mat 2451 חַכְמַת)** was greater than the **wisdom**

**(mechakh'mat -2451 מֵחַכְמַת)** of all the Kedemites and than all the **wisdom (chakh'mat - 2451**

**חַכְמַת)** of the Egyptians. 11 **He was the wisest (vayech'kam -2449 וַיִּחְכַּם)** of all men: [wiser] than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Chalkol, and Darda the sons of Mahol. His fame spread among all the surrounding nations. 12 He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered one thousand and five. 13 He discoursed about trees, from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall; and he discoursed about beasts, birds, creeping things, and fishes. 14 Men of all peoples came to hear Shlomo's/Solomon's **wisdom (chakh'mat 2451 חַכְמַת)**, [sent] by all the kings of the earth who had heard of **his wisdom (chakh'mato 2451 חַכְמָתוֹ)**.

The references here to 2451 are the Feminine noun plural form. It generally means wisdom or the acquired knowledge of the people or persons. The verb here states he was wise.

Iyov/Job 32:9

6 Then Elihu son of Barachel the Buzite said in reply: I have but few years, while you are old; Therefore I was too awestruck and fearful To hold forth among you. 7 I thought, "Let age speak; Let advanced years declare **wise things (Chakh'mah 2451 חַכְמָה)**." 8 But truly it is the spirit in men, The breath of Shaddai, that gives them understanding. 9 It is not the aged **who are wise (yech'khamu יֵבִינוּ מִשְׁפָּט)**, The elders, **who understand how to judge (yabiyenu mish'pat יֵבִינוּ מִשְׁפָּט)**.

Age does not mean automatically that one is wise. While experience can help one to be wise, if one learns not from experience then they do acquire wisdom. Also, if you don't experience it how can you have knowledge of it. Therefore, one must search for knowledge and come to understand it. Only then can one begin to become wise in those areas of investigation.

Tehillim/Psalms 19:7 (8)

8 The teaching/Torah of YHVH is perfect, renewing life; the decrees /testimony of YHVH are enduring, making the simple **wise (mach'kiymat מַחְכִּימַת)**; 9 The precepts of YHVH are just, rejoicing the heart; the commandments/Mitzvot of YHVH is lucid, making the eyes light up. 10 The fear of YHVH is pure, abiding forever; the judgments/Mish'patim of YHVH are true, righteous altogether,

All that is spoken by YHVH makes the person wise who studies it. For a full knowledge of it, this must come from learning his ways and applying them in our lives.

Tehillim/Psalms 105:22

17 He sent ahead of them a man, Joseph, sold into slavery. 18 His feet were subjected to fetters; an iron collar was put on his neck. 19 Until his prediction came true the decree of YHVH purged him. 20 The king sent to have him freed; the ruler of nations released him. 21 He made him adon of his household, empowered him over all his possessions, 22 to discipline his princes at will, to teach his elders **wisdom (yechakem יַחְכֵּם)**.

Here we see the story of Yosef retold and he was seen as a wise man and later we will see he was called a chakham.

Tehillim/Psalms 119:98

98 Your commandments make me **wiser (techakhamenu תַּחְכְּמֵנִי)** than my enemies; they always stand by me.

The mitzvot made us wise when we study them and apply them in our lives.

Mishlei/Proverbs 9:9

9 **Instruct a wise man, and he will grow wiser (ten l'chkham v'yechakam -od תֵּן לְחָכָם וְיַחְכְּמֵהוּ)**; Teach a righteous man, and he will gain in learning.

Wisdom makes the wise one wiser.

Mishlei/Proverbs 13:20

20 **He who keeps company with the wise becomes wise (holek et-chakhamiym yech'kem הוֹלֵךְ אֶת־חַכְּמִיִּם יַחְכֵּם)**, But he who consorts with dullards comes to grief.

Hanging out with wise people rubs off on you.

Mishlei/Proverbs 19:20

20 Listen to advice and accept discipline In order that **you may be wise (תִּחְכַּם tech'kem)** in the end.

Being wise is knowing that you need advice from others and accept discipline from yourself and others.

Ecclesiastes/Qoheleth 2:15

15 So I reflected: "The fate of the fool is also destined for me; to what advantage, then, have **I been wise (Chakham'tiy חֲכַמְתִּי)?**" And I came to the conclusion that that too was futile, 16 **because the wise man (lechakham לְחַכֵּם)**, just like the fool, is not remembered forever; for, as the succeeding days roll by, both are forgotten. Alas, **the wise man (HeChakham הַחֲכָם)** dies, just like the fool!

A Chakham is like you or me we all die. By gathering much wisdom does not add to our lives.

Ecclesiastes/Qoheleth 7:16

15 In my own brief span of life, I have seen both these things: sometimes a good man perishes in spite of his goodness, and sometimes a wicked one endures in spite of his wickedness. 16 So don't overdo goodness **and don't act the wise man to excess (v'al-titchakam וְאַל-תִּתְחַכֵּם)**, or you may be dumfounded. 17 Don't overdo wickedness and don't be a fool, or you may die before your time. 18 It is best that you grasp the one without letting go of the other, for one who fears Elohim will do his duty by both. 19 **Wisdom is more of a stronghold to a wise man (hachakh'mah ta'oz lechham חַכְמָה תְּעוּזָה לְחַכֵּם)** than ten magnates that a city may contain.

Where one should not act like a wise man too much it is still better to be wise.

Let's look at the adjective which describes a person as a Chakham. Remember this is reference number 2450.

Bereshit/Genesis 41:39

39 Pharaoh said to Yosef: Since a Elohim has made you know all this, there is none as **wise (chakham חַכָּם)** and discerning as you;

Here we see the Paro refer to Yosef as Chakham. His ability to describe the Kings dream and give him its meaning displayed wisdom of Elohim. His plan of action displayed his ability to discern the ways to handle the drought.

Shemot/Exodus 28:3

3 So you, speak to each **who is wise (chakh'mey תַּכְּמִי)** of mind whom I have filled with the spirit of **practical-wisdom (chakh'mah תַּכְּמָה)**, that they may make Aharon's garments, to hallow him, to be-priest for me.

The ones filled with a spirit of wisdom is seen as Chakham in what they do. In this case we are dealing with skill.

Shemot/Exodus 31:6

6 And I, here I give (to be) with him Oholiav son of Ahisamakh, of the tribe of Dan; in the mind of all those **wise (chakham תַּכְּמִי)** of mind I place **wisdom (chakh'mah תַּכְּמָה)**, that they may make all that I have commanded you:

Here again we see one who is skilled in a skilled is referred to as a Chakham or one with wisdom.

Shemot/Exodus 35:10

10 And everyone **wise (Chakham תַּכְּמִי)** of mind among you is to come and is to make all that YHVH has commanded:

Here we see again that high skill in a discipline is what makes one a Chakham.

Shemot/Exodus 35:25

25 And every woman **wise (chakh'mat תַּכְּמָת)** of mind, with their hands they spun and brought their spinning- the blue-violet, the purple, the worm-scarlet and the byssus,

If one thinks only men may be called Chakham then they are mistaken. This is a skilled woman.

Devarim/Deuteronomy 1:13, 15

12 How can I carry, I alone, your load, your burden, your quarreling? 13 Provide yourselves (with) men, **wise (chakhamiym תַּכְּמִיִּם)**, understanding (un'bonim וְיֹבֵנִים) and knowledgeable (viydu'iym

(וִידְעִים), for your tribes, and I will set them as heads-over-you. 14 And you answered me, you said: Good is the word that you have proposed to do! 15 So I took heads of your tribes, men **wise** (Chakhamiyim חַכְמַיִם) and knowledgeable (viydu'iyim וִידְעִים), and I placed them as heads over you, as rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens, and as officials for your tribes. 16 Now I commanded your judges at that time, saying: hear-out (what is) between your brothers, judge with equity between each-man and his brother or a sojourner. 17 You are not to (specially-)recognize a face in judgment, as the small, so the great, you are to hear-them-out; you are not to be-in-fear of any-man, for judgment-it is Elohim's! And (any) legal-matter too hard for you, bring-near to me, and I will hear-it-out. 18 So I commanded you at that time concerning all the matters that you should do.

Here we see Chakhamim placed over the tribes to judge in manners of the Torah. Thus, they were knowledgeable of it and had wisdom to judge from it. The people picked them out and Moshe as the leader of the time placed them in their places.

Devarim/Deuteronomy 4:6

4 But you, the ones clinging to YHVH your Elohim, are alive, all of you, today! 5 See, I am teaching you laws and regulations as YHVH my Elohim has commanded me, to do thus, amid the land that you are entering to possess. 6 You are to keep (them), you are to observe (them), for **that (will be) wisdom-for-you** (chakh'mat'chem חַכְמַתְּכֶם) and understanding-for-you in the eyes of the peoples who, when

they hear all these laws, will say: Only a **wise (Chakham חַכָּם)** and understanding people is this great nation! 7 For who (else) is (such) a great nation that has Elohim so near to it as YHVH Eloheynu in all our calling on him? 8 And who (else) is (such) a great nation that has laws and regulations so equitable as all this Instruction that I put before you today?

Chokh'mah is a feminine noun but it deals mostly with the skills a person has acquired. Chakham is the adjective that refers to the person who have achieved skill in an area of study. That could be weaving, metal working, or torah study. This study just scratches the surface of all the verse that refer to these words in Hebrew.

What is the Role of the Chakham in Karaite Judaism?

First, to know what something is means looking at what it isn't. A Chakham is not a current day ruler who dictates what someone should do. A Chakham is not someone whose advice is like the judge in Devarim 17. A Chakham is not the person who makes sure you are following the miqra.

A Chakham is a teacher, an advisor, a friend, a brother, and someone you are not afraid to go to. My experience with Chakhamim has been the humbleness they approach Torah. They don't see themselves as rulers over the people. I see the Chakham as the modern day scholar who is not a replacement for

the Kohen. Just as the judges of the past that would rule over disputes in Navi Moshe's time they were to show balance judgment and in their ruling they would teach. It is possible to assemble a group of chakhamim in a beit din to rule on something. I think we need to respect their learning and skill just like one would respect the weaver or goldsmith or carver of sculpture (not feselim of course).