

ABSTRACT

THE KARAITES ON COMMANDMENTS THAT ARISE FROM
HUMAN INITIATIVE IN LIGHT OF THEIR DISCUSSION OF THE
SCIATIC TENDON (GENESIS 32:33)

Yoram Erder

According to the story in Gen 32, as a result of the injury sustained by Jacob during his encounter with the divine messenger, Genesis 32 concludes: 'Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the sciatic tendon attached to the socket of the hip' (32:33). The Talmudic sages considered this practice to be one of the divinely ordained prohibitions, even though it is not presented as such in Genesis nor is it mentioned among the positive and negative commandments communicated to Moses. They were divided on the question of whether it was observed prior to the giving of the Torah (Mishnah Hulin 7:6). In the view of Josephus (*Antiquities* 1: 20, 2 [334]), the prohibition was initiated by Jacob himself, whereas in the Qumran scroll 4Q158.1, the biblical account is rewritten to attribute the prohibition to God's own command, given at the time of the event.

The Karaite sages too accepted the prohibition to eat the sciatic tendon, but all the above questions were debated. Most of their interpretations were devoted to the question of whether this was indeed a commandment that arose from human initiative, and if so, whether on the part of Jacob or that of his sons. Similarly, the narrative nature of the account in Genesis raised the question whether an actual commandment can be derived from it at all.

Most Karaites accepted the principle that commandments may arise from human initiative. The instructions given by Jonadab the son of Rechab to his sons (Jeremiah 35) were considered as a model of such commandments. In addition, the oath of Joseph's brothers (Genesis 50), the fasts mentioned in the Book of Zechariah (Zechariah 8:19), and the holiday of Purim were considered as commandments that arose from human initiative.