



THE KARAITE JEWS OF AMERICA

Congregation B'nai Israel

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www.karaites.org

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March 6, 2017

To: Members of the Karaite Jewish Community,

I know it is traditional for a new president to express a vision for the future. I would like first, however, to start with a reflection. Just last week, several members of our community, my wife Maryellen, and I had the pleasure of attending a talk at the Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life in Berkeley entitled "Magic and Medicine in the Karaite Manuscripts in the Magnes Collection." The program was a precursor to a planned 2018 exhibition at the Magnes that will focus on Karaite artifacts and archives.

The presenter was UC Berkeley-UCSF medical student Alan Elbaum, who was raised in an Orthodox Jewish family. His presentation will soon be available online, but because I was so personally moved by his comments I want to share with you his introduction:

"My interest in this project", Alan said, "began just over a year ago, at around the same time that I started attending Shabbat services at the Karaite synagogue in Daly City, where I was welcomed with incredible warmth and hospitality. Those of you who know me in the audience have probably heard me talk about the Karaites, and how I've felt most at home there out of any Jewish community in the Bay Area".

Stories like this and how it speaks to our mission of reaching the young and reaching beyond ourselves, only intensify the great pride with which I have accepted the honor of being elected President of the Board of Karaite Jews of America at this turning point in our journey. I last served as President for multiple terms ending in 2005, when I first began to dream of ways to ensure that the future of our community in the United States remains as vibrant as our past in Egypt.

Time is limited for we who are the first-generation Karaite Jewish Americans: refugees who settled in the Bay Area and across our adopted country, who adapted and who found success in America in the latter half of the 20th century, but who also sustained a spirit of community. We have thrived despite many challenges in the past, but we face new challenges today.

If we are to survive as Karaite Jews – thinking about our children and their children - I knew early on that we had to be more proactive about finding ways of instilling in the next generations pride in our identity and heritage as members of a unique branch of our Jewish family tree. I also knew that we could not survive in a vacuum, and that we must build ever stronger bridges to Israel and to the larger Jewish world in which we live.

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These are the issues and the challenges that have motivated me for many years, and that have driven me as a proud American Karaite Jew to take on increasing responsibilities for our community.

My objective? To ensure our future as we honor our past, a mandate that found its definition in our **“Foundation for the Future”** Campaign. I am so proud of all we have already accomplished over these last months as we launched the Campaign and secured all but \$100,000 in pledges and funding toward our \$1.2 million goal. Now that we have broken ground I can report, as Campaign Committee Chairman, that we are well on our way toward achieving the goals laid out in our Campaign rationale:

- To **renovate** Congregation B'nai Israel and its sanctuary, and to expand our building with a new social hall that will serve as a vibrant gathering place for dialogue and celebration.
- To **Create** a national Karaite Jewish Cultural Center for learning, advocacy and fellowship.
- To **Establish and Sustain** new cultural, spiritual, and social programs to enhance outreach to young and old, and to provide learning opportunities for anyone interested in Karaite Jewish traditions.
- To **Strengthen** our relationships within the global Karaite Jewish community, and with all of world Jewry.

As President, I will continue to advance the renovation/expansion project and will provide direction to longer-term strategic planning for the Cultural Center. This must include the engagement of new young volunteer leaders to succeed and replace those of us who have worked so long on behalf of the community. And it must include the development of a strategic roadmap and budget needed to sustain activities through the eventual engagement of a permanent Rav/Education Director reporting to the Board, who will be a spiritual leader for our community in the United States, and who will administer the operations of Congregation B'nai Israel and the Karaite Jewish Cultural Center long-term.

In the meantime, I want to salute the tremendous efforts made by our KJA Board under the leadership of immediate past-President Henry Mourad, without whose commitments the developments of the last year would not have been possible. Grateful recognition goes to Acting Rav Joseph Moussa and Emeritus Rav Joe Pessah, whose untiring service binds our community together in ways that are unimaginable without their dedication, compassion and wisdom. Along with the whole community, I thank Marc Khedr and Sarine Moussa for all their hard work on behalf of our synagogue and its preparation for construction. And sincere thanks go to Shawn Lichaa, who is forging ahead with so many important educational and outreach projects; and to other younger members of our congregation including Michael Ovadia, Nora Massuda, and Victor Khedr, who are stepping up into leadership roles.

All our accomplishments over the last year would not be coming to fruition were it not for our Campaign's two visionary challenge match donors. A million thanks go to these generous individuals whose investments in our Campaign propelled us past the \$1 million benchmark as we move toward our \$1.2 million Campaign goal! Their commitments, and those of many

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others, are helping us realize our objectives through a broad base of generous financial support and selfless volunteer effort.

Lastly, personal recognition goes to my wife and partner, Maryellen Himell-Ovadia, who was raised in a Conservative Jewish family, but whose unparalleled contributions to our effort have provided inspiration to me and to all who have seen her dedication and enthusiasm for our mission. As our Campaign Director, her design and implementation of our Campaign strategy grounded in her experience as a seasoned Bay Area development professional, ensured our success.

In closing, I think back to Alan Elbaum's words and sentiments, upon which I reflected at the beginning of this letter. They speak volumes to that which makes all our efforts worthwhile: the value of building bridges to the young and to the larger community. If you have not already supported this effort, please do so now with your financial and volunteer commitments. We still have much to accomplish and \$100,000 in funds to secure as we proceed with construction and planning for the future. In fact, \$50,000 must be raised by March 31st in order to complete the challenge matches, and another \$50,000 by June 30th to meet our immediate construction goal.

Please continue to read our e-newsletters and website announcements for construction and Campaign updates, and for details related to alternate locations for Shabbat services, holidays, and life cycle events between the time we vacate B'nai Israel in early April and re-open in time for the 2017 High Holidays. Please contact me at davidovadia62@gmail.com with any questions or comments, and thank you, from all of us on the Board, for your engagement and your commitment to our cause.

Shalom and Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "David Ovadia". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

David Ovadia
President, KJA Board of Directors