

Questions & Answers

4. Why is it that in leap years Karaites celebrate Purim in Adar I, while Rabbanites celebrate Purim in Adar II?

As Karaites, we are used to having our holidays fall on different days from our Rabbinic brethren. Usually, our holidays only differ by a few days, due to the fact that the Karaite/Biblical Calendar sets its holidays based on the sighting of the new moon (whereas the Rabbinic Calendar is a “fixed” calendar that is intended to approximate the new moon sightings).

In leap years, Karaites celebrate Purim a **full month before** our Rabbinic brethren. The Book of Esther specifically tells us that events of Purim occurred in the Twelfth Month, which was referred to as the month of Adar. (Esther 9:1) And as Karaites, we have proudly maintained the tradition of celebrating Purim in the 12th Month, in the month of Adar.

The reason that the Rabbanites celebrate Purim a month after the Karaites in leap years is related to a nuance with respect to the Rabbinic calendar. As background, the Tanakh does not “fix” the total number of months in a year. There are either 12 months or 13 months, depending on the agricultural conditions in Israel. During the Twelfth Month, the Jews would inspect the ripeness of the barley crops in the Land of Israel. If the crops did not yet reach a certain stage of ripeness, we would add an extra biblical month (*i.e.*, a thirteenth month) to the end of the calendar. People call this extra month a leap month. And Karaites of the middle ages (and even some today) proudly searched the Land of Israel to see if the barley had reached an appropriate stage of ripeness.

The concept of a leap month might seem odd to the western mind. A leap month is somewhat analogous to the leap year in the Gregorian Calendar, which adds an extra day (“February 29th”) every four years in order to keep the secular calendar in line with the agricultural seasons.

Now, back to the Rabbinic Calendar: The Rabbanites long ago stopped looking for the ripening barley to determine when one year ends and the next year begins. So, in order to keep the Rabbinic Calendar in line with the agricultural seasons, the Rabbis add 7 leap months (*i.e.*, 7 years that have an extra month) throughout their 19 year calendar cycle. Recall that in the Book of Esther, the Twelfth Month was referred to as the month of Adar. In years in which there is a leap month, the calendar has an Adar I and an Adar II. The Rabbinic tradition is actually to add their leap month **before** the twelfth month. As a result, Adar I in the Rabbinic tradition is considered the “leap month” and Adar II is considered the “normal” Adar.

The Karaite tradition has always been to celebrate Purim in the Twelfth Month on the date the Tanakh tells us the events happened – even if according the agricultural cycle there will be an extra (*i.e.*, thirteenth) month added at the end. In the Rabbinic tradition, in years where they have an extra biblical month, they always celebrate Purim in the last month of the year. That is, during leap years, the Rabbanites celebrate Purim during Adar II (which they deem to be the “normal” Adar).