



“The War at the Gates” by Shelomo ben Aharon of Poswol: Issues of Text Reading and Interpretation

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Abstract: The article presents—using the Karaite work “The War at the Gates” by Shelomo ben Aharon (17th/18th century; a polemic with rabbinic Judaism)—three common issues related to the analysis of Hebrew manuscripts written before the 19th century. These issues include: (1) determining the fundamental meaning of individual parts of the work; (2) analyzing the argumentative structure of the work’s narrative in relation to its biblical interpretation, which seeks to justify specific religious laws established within the religious community of the tradition/author; (3) verifying certain commonly accepted scholarly assumptions. I demonstrate how I addressed these challenges while working on the aforementioned treatise and attempt to draw generalized, practical conclusions.

Keywords: studies in Karaite literature (Hebrew texts), Karaite religious law (halakha), Shelomo ben Aharon, methodological challenges

The aim of this article is to present selected research problems related to the reading and analysis of “The War at the Gates” by Shelomo ben Aharon.¹ It is a Karaite polemic against Rabbinic Judaism. The text originates from the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries in the Lithuanian territories of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.

The analyzed polemic presents selected religious laws of Rabbinic and Karaite Judaism, particularly those that distinguish the two religious denominations. In this

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¹ Shelomo ben Aharon, born before 1665 in Pozvol, Lithuania, and died in 1745 in Trakai, was a Karaite scholar and clergyman. He was the author of piyyutim (liturgical poems) and larger analytical texts, including polemics against Rabbinic Judaism such as “He made for himself a litter” (ול השע ווירפא), polemics against Christianity titled “Tower of Strength” (מגדל עוז), a book on Hebrew grammar called “Fine and Tender” (רך וטוב), and a text on the education of youth named “Instruct the Youth” (הנוך לינער). For more information about him and his works, see Gottlob 1865; Sulimierski, Chlebowski, and Walewski 1887, 854–55; Mann 1935, 1971; Elgamil 1979, 1999; Corinaldi 1984; Astren 2003a, 2003b, 2004; Berti 2005; Akhiezer and Lasker 2011; Muchowski 2013, 2014; Tuori 2013; Akhiezer 2016, 2018. It is worth familiarizing oneself with two Karaite sources that mention this Karaite scholar: Lutsky 2002; Yehuda ben David of Kukizov’s “History of Karaite Scholars” (edition: Elgamil 2015).

literary theological dispute, various methods of legal-religious argumentation were employed by both religious communities. The work also showcases brilliant literary and theological analyses of biblical texts, occasionally revealing the emotions of the interlocutors who are convinced of their own beliefs. The work also does not lack poetic elements, especially in the “Introduction,” which is composed in the form of a prophecy or divine revelation that explains the reasons for the conflict between the two faiths (this section is written in verse, occasionally rhymed, featuring poetic imagery and biblical expressions that appear in a new context).

“The War at the Gates,” like any other theological, or philosophical work in the field of Jewish studies, poses significant methodological challenges for researchers of Jewish culture, primarily due to the following three difficulties: (1) the challenge of determining the meaning of certain passages in the work—this may result from incorrect Hebrew syntax (including the grammatical inconsistency of individual sentence parts), from errors in the spelling of individual words, from careless transcription of the text by copyists, or from weaving into the text fragments of other works without adjusting them to the syntactic and content structure of one’s own statement; (2) the issue of incomplete argumentation—in the literary analysis of the Hebrew Bible, Karaite scholars occasionally apply a given method inconsistently; this lack of methodological rigor results in conclusions that are partial and, consequently, insufficient for a comprehensive interpretation of the analyzed biblical passage; (3) falsification or verification of accepted scholarly claims—the difficulty associated with the vagueness of the content as well as the argumentation of the work causes it to be understood in entirely different ways by various researchers, hence, with a better understanding of the text, it becomes necessary to simultaneously eliminate research statements that do not withstand the scrutiny of established facts.

Each of the challenges mentioned above will be separately addressed in this work. However, due to the limitation in the text size of the article, I will limit myself to providing one example for each of them.

In this paper, I base my research on the oldest known manuscript of “The War at the Gates,” dating back to the year 1730. Its original is housed in the Bodleian Library in Oxford.² Although the manuscript was transcribed during the lifetime of Shelomo ben Aharon, he is not its author. The copyist is Mordechai ben Shemuel (מרדכי בן שמואל), the son of Shelomo ben Aharon’s sister, as he refers to the author of “The War at the Gates” as *m^sarep̄* (מסרף), “maternal uncle.”³ The manuscript was transcribed in Kukizov in order to be sent to Constantinople.

² Heb.e.12 2/2777 (microfilm signature in the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem: F21357).

³ Cf. Mann 1935, 1285, as well as footnote 730, where it is mentioned that Mordechai ben Shemuel’s mother was said to be a cousin of Shelomo ben Aharon.

1. The Problem of Determining the Meaning (of Certain Passages) of the Work

When reading for the first time any Hebrew-language halakhic text of the Polish-Lithuanian Karaites from the period up to the 19th century, scholars of Judaism face a significant intellectual challenge. Firstly, because the Karaites rarely published their works in print in this region, and they exist in manuscripts where various errors in transcription are more common than in printed texts. Secondly, the handwritten nature of the script (and this particularly applies to careless handwriting) often hinders the proper reading of words, disrupting the process of understanding the basic meaning of sentences, expressions, and consequently, the entire text. Thirdly, during this period, the Karaites had not yet developed a consistent, comprehensive and current system of punctuation marks, often using various graphical symbols (which may vary from text to text or scribe to scribe), the use and meaning of which is not entirely always clear and certain. Fourthly, Karaites—like Rabbanite Jews—made extensive use of the literary tradition of earlier generations, except that they drew on both Karaite and Rabbanite works. A characteristic feature of Karaite literature in connection with intertextuality is that they did not always quote someone else’s words in accordance with the spirit of the original text.⁴ Fifthly, the Hebrew of Karaite scribes—from various lands—up to the 19th century deviates sometimes from the rules of the Hebrew language as we know it today. Their Hebrew is rich in expressions, linguistic rules, syntax characteristic of vernacular languages they used in everyday life, which obviously complicates the process of perceiving their works.

All of this makes the legal-religious texts of the Karaites of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth challenging to comprehend, and only a few scholars thoroughly analyze them, with even fewer producing critical editions of them with translations.

In this subsection, a fragment of “The War at the Gates” is presented, which will undergo such analysis aiming to precisely determine its meaning, along with a discussion of the problems that arise in it, with particular emphasis on intertextual references. The following excerpt from Shelomo ben Aharon’s work was chosen because it reflects all those problems mentioned above. And here it is (fol. 126r)⁵:

	וממה שכתוב בעל ספר	10
	צדה לדרך במאמר ד פרק ה נראה שגם אתם אוכלים בלא בדיקה כמו שאמר שם	11
	וזל בהמה מסוכנת ואכל כבר שאין צריך לה אסור לשחיטה אלא אך יש שהות	12
	ביום לאכול ממנה כזית ואם אין שהות לבדקה ולנתחת יכול לאכול בלא בדיקה	13

⁴ The characteristic feature of Karaite literature mentioned above does not imply that it is distinctive trait, but rather that it is one of its properties. In Rabbinic literature, one can also encounter instances of a more flexible or less literal approach to sources.

⁵ All translations (concerning “The War at the Gates”) from Hebrew to English presented in this article are my own, unless otherwise noted.

ואם שחטה כשרה לא יביאנה במוט ויביאנה בידו אברים אברים עוף שדרס	14
בהמה שצריך שהייה מעת אל עת ובדיקה אחר שחיטה יכול לשחטו ביום טוב ולא	15
נחוש אם ימצא טרפה עכל [...]	16

I would like to clarify the arising doubts when attempting to understand the presented Hebrew fragment: it is impossible to comprehend it without both the context in which it appears in Shelomo's work and without knowledge of the issue of kashrut (dietary laws) in Jewish culture in general. Furthermore, even being aware of both contexts and despite a good understanding of the issue addressed by the fragment, without delving into specific Jewish texts, it is not possible for anyone to read that fragment correctly in Hebrew and fully understand it. So, let's start from the beginning.

The presented fragment appears in "The War at the Gates" in the context of the issue of the kosher status of meat from an animal known to be about to die (e.g., due to illness, old age, or an accident). According to Rabbinic halakha, the meat of an animal with serious physical defects (such as a perforated alimentary canal—*נקובת וושט*, *n^oqubat vešet*; a cut throat—*פסוקת הגרגרת*, *p^osuqat gargeret*; a perforated brain membrane—*ניקב קרום של המוח*, *niqqab q^orum šel ham-moah*; a broken spine, including a severed spinal cord—*נשברה השדרה ונפסק החוט שלה*, *nišb^ora haš-šidra ve-niḥ^oš ha-huṭ šela*; or carrying a serious illness is not fit for consumption) (Bab. Talmud: Chullin 31a–b, 42a–43a). Therefore, to determine whether an animal is healthy, rabbinic authorities conduct the appropriate inspection of the animal (both before and after slaughter), called *בדיקת טרפות* (*b^odīqat tarḥuṭ*). If such an examination is not performed, the meat of the animal is non-kosher.

In Karaite halakha, the fundamental issue being checked is essentially whether the animal belongs to the "clean" (*tahor*, טהור) or "unclean" (*tame'*, טמא) category, based on the guidelines found in the Torah (Lev 11:3–19; 20:24–25; Deut 14:4–19). Of course, Karaites also assess the fitness of an animal for consumption, but before slaughter and not as strictly as Rabbanites. They do so on the basis of how the animal in question behaves (how it eats, drinks, moves), assuring that this is how things were done "in Biblical times." Karaites cite biblical examples related to offering thousands of animal sacrifices at once, where the Bible does not mention the requirement for a detailed examination of animals, nor does it require an examination of the slaughtered animal afterward (i.e.: 1 Kgs 8:63; 2 Chr 7:5; 15:11; 29:33; 30:24; 35:7).⁶

And it is at this point in Shelomo ben Aharon's polemic that the passage from "The War at the Gates" quoted earlier appears. Aware of the differences that divide adherents of Rabbinic and Karaite halakha in this matter, the defender of Karaite

⁶ As indicated by the Karaite's response to the fourth question of the Talmudist in the work "The War at the Gates." It is worth noting that the Karaites base their religious law not only on the analysis of the Torah, but also on the remaining books of the Hebrew Bible.

Judaism decides to attack Rabbinism due to its inconsistency with biblical commandments. Namely, he rhetorically asks whether it is permissible to slaughter an animal that is close to death, and whether the meat of that animal will be kosher. The Karaite scholar is disturbed by the fact that, according to Rabbinic halakha, this can be done, and to support his words, he cites the statement of Rabbinic scholar Menachem ben Aharon ben Zerach (14th century) “The provisions for Journey” (צדה לדרך).⁷

The difficulty in understanding Shelomo’s citation makes it necessary to contrast it with the wording of the original. Such a comparison shows that some of the expressions changed by Shelomo (or the copyist)—such as שהיה, שדרס, לשחיטה, or לשחטו—still fit the sense of their original context, and however, on the other hand, he (or the copyists), makes the kind of changes that alter this original statement, like the words: כשרה (instead of the original בשדה),⁸ or ואם (instead of ואפילו). Below is the already quoted excerpt along with highlighted differences in relation to “The provisions for Journey” (curly brackets {} indicate that in Shelomo’s quote the word was replaced with another; the equality sign signifies a similar meaning, whereas the inequality sign denotes a different meaning):

- | | | |
|--|---|----|
| | [...] וממה שכתוב בעל ספר | 10 |
| | צדה לדרך במאמר ד פרק ח נראה שגם אתם אוכלים בלא בדיקה כמו שאמר שם | 11 |
| | וזל בהמה מסוכנת ואכל כבר שאין צריך לה אסור לשחיטה={לשוחטה} אלא אכ יש שהות | 12 |
| | ביום לאכול ממנה כזית ואם={ואפילו} אין שהות לבדקה={לבדקה} ולנתחת={ולנתחה} יכול לאכול | 13 |
| | בלא בדיקה | |
| | ואם שחטה כשרה={בשדה} לא יביאנה במוט ויביאנה בידו אברים אברים עוף שדרס={שדרסו} | 14 |
| | בהמה שצריך שהיה={שהיה} מעת אל עת ובדיקה אחר שחיטה יכול לשחטו={לשוחטו} ביום טוב ולא | 15 |
| | נחוש אם ימצא טרפה עכל [...] | 16 |

Despite the fact that the quotation has been located and corrected in terms of the source text, it is still not entirely comprehensible (sentence structure errors, the use of certain mental shortcuts, the presence of unclear legal-religious terms). How to methodically approach solving such problems?

It is best to start with issues that seem easiest to resolve, and in our case, these are terminological issues. Therefore, I suggest focusing on identifying key expressions in the quotation and then searching for their literary sources. In the case of rabbinic halakhic literature, such searches should always begin with the Mishnah and Talmud

⁷ I depend on the version of the text from 1567 (place of publication: סביוניטה) available online: <https://beta.hebrewbooks.org/45948> (see Menachem ben Aharon ben Zerach, n.d.). The quote’s page on the website follows the original pagination: קצנ verso. An older version (the place of publication פירארא, albeit with some differences) from 1554 is also available at: <https://beta.hebrewbooks.org/44488> (no pagination in the manuscript, in the PDF file, it is page 443).

⁸ This word appears in several different manuscripts, and the reasons for its misreading should not be sought in the similarity of the letters ט to ט, as well as כ to כ.

since they, along with the Torah, form the basis of Jewish legal-religious reflection. For example, the term בהמה מסוכנת appears in Beitzah 3:3, in a similar sentence structure and context as in Menachem's text. This passage reads as follows:

בהמה מסוכנת לא ישחוט. אלא אם כן יש שהות ביום לאכול ממנה כזית צלי. רבי עקיבא אומר אפילו כזית חי מבית טביחתה. שחטה בשדה. לא יביאנה במוט. ובמוטה. אבל מביא בידו אברים אברים:⁹

Based on the clear similarities between this Mishnah fragment and the treatise of Menachem, one can hypothesize that the rabbinic scholar incorporates elements of the Mishnah into his discourse. He does the same with the passage concerning poultry, which, in turn, appears in the Talmudic text Beitzah 34a:

דרסה או שטרפה בכותל, או שרצצתה בהמה ומפרכסת, ושהתה מעת לעת ושחטה – כשרה. אמר רבי אלעזר בר ינאי משום רבי אלעזר בן אנטיגנוס: צריכה בדיקה.¹⁰

In the above examples, one can observe the pattern that Menachem begins his statement with the first words of a given Mishnaic or Talmudic fragment and then, in his own words, explains how one should behave in that situation. Such a way of quoting source texts is characteristic of Jewish commentators and codifiers of religious law, who assume that the reader is familiar enough with the Mishnah and Talmud to infer the specific fragment based on a few initial words. Of course, our current knowledge, even that of specialists and researchers, deviates from the familiarity possessed by the average scholar or rabbinic clergy in the 14th century when entire passages were memorized. Therefore, it is quite natural that today we rely on various computer programs and search engines with databases of Jewish texts.

Regardless, the quoted passages from the Mishnah and Talmud shed light on many aspects of Menachem's citation, but do not resolve the issue of the peculiar expression: בהמה מסוכנת ואכל כבר. However, it turns out that there is a text in which the concept of בהמה מסוכנת and the words אכל כבר appear in the same paragraph, and it is

⁹ Based on: www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Beitzah.3.3?vhe=Mishnah_ed_Romm_Vilna_1913&lang=bi, accessed May 8, 2025. In the following English translation, I am heavily guided by *The William Davidson Talmud* (n.d.): "If an animal is in danger of dying one may not slaughter it unless there is still time in the day for him to eat an olive-bulk of roasted meat from the animal. Rabbi Akiva says: even if there is only time to eat an olive-bulk of raw meat from the place where the animal is slaughtered. If one slaughtered an animal in the field, he may not bring it on a pole or on a set of poles—he must bring it by hand, limb by limb."

¹⁰ The fragment—and this is also relevant for us here—is a commentary on Mishnah, Chullin 3:3. I am using: <https://www.sefaria.org/Beitzah.34a.2?lang=bi>, accessed May 8, 2025. Here is the English translation (*The William Davidson Talmud*, n.d.) along with my modifications: "If one trampled [fowl] with his foot, or threw it against a wall, or if an animal crushed it, and it is twitching; and if the animal remained alive for 24 hours and one subsequently slaughtered it—it is kosher. Rabbi Elazar bar Yannai said in the name of Rabbi Elazar ben Antigonus: It requires examination."

to this text that Menachem may have been referring.¹¹ In the well-known "Four Columns" (ארבעה טורים), authored by Jacob ben Asher (13/14th century), in the chapter *Orach Chaim* (498, אורח חיים), we read:

[...] וכ"כ א"א הרא"ש ז"ל דלא שייך הכנה בלידת העגל בהמה מסוכנת שירא שמא תמות והוא אכל כבר וא"צ לה אסור לשוחטה אלא א"כ יש שהות ביום לאכול כזית ממנה מבע"י ואפילו אין שהות ביום לבדוקה ולנתחה יכול לאכול בלא בדיקה ואם שחטה בשדה לא יביאנה לעיר במוט או במוטה כדרך שעושה בחול אלא יביאנה בידו איברים איברים: עוף שנדרס שצריך שהייה מעת לעת ובדיקה אחר שחיטה משום חשש טריפות יכול לשוחטו בי"ט ולא חיישינן שמא ימצא טרפה [...]¹²

The mere cursory reading of this paragraph already shows that Menachem essentially quotes the statement of Yacob ben Asher, who, in turn, commented on both the Mishnah and the Talmud. Now it is clear that the words *כבר ואכל* refer to *עגל*, a newborn animal strong enough to eat, a term that is absent in both Menachem's text and, let alone, Shelomo's text. The absence of this concept greatly complicated our understanding of the meaning of Menachem's statement in Shelomo's text.

So, after locating all the intertexts occurring in the discussed fragment of "The War at the Gates," it turns out that it is composed of six different texts, not just two, as it might seem based on Shelomo ben Aharon's word (meaning that the text comprises Shelomo's and Menachem's contributions). Thus, Shelomo quotes Menachem, who quotes the words of Yacob ben Asher, who analyzes a fragment from the Mishnah and another fragment from the Talmud, with the latter still quoting from another Mishnaic passage. Ultimately, this is how the Hebrew text without punctuation from Shelomo's work looks like, with a graphical indication of quotes, paraphrases, or allusions to various intertexts mentioned here, which originally made it so difficult to read and understand the presented part of "The War at the Gates":

10 [...] וממה שכתוב בעל ספר

11 **צדה לדרך במאמר ד' פרק ח' נראה שגם אתם אוכלים בלא בדיקה כמו שאמר שם**

12 **וזה "בהמה מסוכנת ואכל כבר שאין צריך לה אסור לשחיטה אלא אכ' יש שהות**

13 **ביום לאכול ממנה כזית ואם אין שהות לבדקה ולנתחה יכול לאכול בלא בדיקה**

14 **ואם שחטה כשרה לא יביאנה במוט ויביאנה בידו אברים אברים עוף שדרס**

15 **בהמה שצריך שהייה מעת אל עת ובדיקה אחר שחיטה יכול לשחטו ביום טוב ולא**

16 **נחשו אם ימצא טרפה**" עכ"ל [...]

¹¹ In the work of Joseph Karo "Set Table" (שלחן ערוך) the mentioned sequence of words can also be found, but we cannot consider this work here, as Menachem died around 100 years before the birth of Joseph.

¹² See Jacob ben Asher, n.d.

It should be noted that each of the hypotexts in Shelomo's work (> **“The provisions for Journey”** > **«Four Columns»**¹³ > **Mishnah, Beitzah 3:3** + **Talmud, Beitzah 34a** > **Mishnah, Chullin 3:3**) is invoked by subsequent commentators with changes in both vocabulary and syntax, as well as modifications to the content. As mentioned earlier, this makes it extremely challenging to correctly understand certain sections of the whole utterance. Furthermore, the passage is basically impossible to interpret correctly without referencing all the hypotexts (a text that serves as a source or reference for another text) since its meaning inherently resides in the meanings of these intertexts.

Needless to say, translating this part of “The War at the Gates” into any modern language is an extremely challenging task, since—as I said—the full meaning of the passage does not directly follow from Shelomo's citation, which also disrupts the syntax of the statement and causes additional textual problems that I haven't detailed here. Shelomo's dialogue has a legal character and, therefore, naturally features a “legal-religious” style typical of Jewish halakhic texts, such as quoting incomplete fragments of the discussed text with the assumption that a logical whole is implied, or using established halakhic expressions and terms. Regarding translation techniques, there seems to be no one-size-fits-all approach, as they largely depend on the purpose for which the decision was made to translate this particular text. Below is my translation of the aforementioned excerpt:

10 [...] [Also], from what the author of the book has written,

11 [I mean] “The provisions for Journey”, in Article 4, Chapter 8, it follows that you also eat [meat] without [conducting animal] inspections, according to what he said there,

12 quote: **“The animal that is in danger – has already eaten – the prohibition related to slaughter is unnecessary unless there is a sufficient amount of time**

13 **on that day to consume** from it [a piece of meat the size of] an olive – but if there is not enough time to inspect and examine it – it is permitted to consume it without [conducting] an inspection [of the animal] –

14 if it was **slaughtered** [in the field] – **it shall not be brought on a rod**, but shall be **brought in his hands, piece by piece** – poultry that has been trampled

15 by cattle – **requires a 24-hour stand-off [aside] – and inspection after slaughter** – it can be slaughtered on a feast day – and [then] we don't

16 **seek whether there is any defect [in it]»** – end of quote. [...]

13 The quotations from Menachem's and Yacob ben Asher's works are marked the same way because Menachem quotes his illustrious predecessor generally in full, and in Shelomo's text, they are indistinguishable from each other. For this reason, I have added various quotation marks to at least visually indicate the boundaries of the hypotexts, thus presenting the English reader with how complex texts Jewish cultural scholars are dealing with.

In the above translation—which concludes this section of the article—I aimed to render the discussed fragment of Shelomo’s work in a way that is faithful both in terms of content and form to the original text, without taking into account the content that a thorough analysis of individual intertexts can bring to this part of “The War at the Gates” (there will probably be time for that in the future). In the translation, I intentionally used graphic and punctuation elements (mainly hyphens) to emphasize the fragmented and vaguely uncertain sense of this linguistic statement. The translation I have presented highlights the complex translational process of the syntactically “fragmented” passage from Shelomo’s text. A correct analysis, and subsequently a translation, require the identification of all intertexts (which in Shelomo ben Aharon’s work are cited fragmentarily and without source attribution), and further, their integration into the discourse of the Karaite scholar in a manner that ensures its meaning aligns with the argumentative logic of the passage from “The War at the Gates.” The juxtaposition of the original Hebrew source text, which does not clearly reveal this meaning, with my final English translation—which, as I believe, more clearly reflects the author’s intent—demonstrates the extensive process involved in text analysis (primarily the localization of all intertexts, but not exclusively) in order to reach its underlying meaning.

2. Analysis of the Religious Dispute in Terms of Internal Analytical Consistency¹⁴

In this subsection of the article, an analysis of the reasoning and drawing of conclusions in the religious dispute between Karaism and Rabbanism, as described by Shelomo ben Aharon in “The War at the Gates,” will be conducted. In the first analytical step, the Karaite-Rabbinic conflict related to the issue of counting of the Omer (ספירת העומר)¹⁵ will be briefly summarized. Subsequently, I will present the logical inclinations arising from an internal analysis of the arguments presented by both sides in this literary-theological dialogue.

Theological disputes between the Rabbanites and the Karaites regarding the precise terms of the Omer period have essentially been ongoing since the inception of the Karaite movement, roughly from the 9th century. The positions of both sides, as well as the manner of argumentation on this issue, fundamentally remain unchanged

¹⁴ This subsection is partially based on my previous article (Kubicki 2022).

¹⁵ The issue of determining the beginning and end of the Omer period did not, of course, arise with the emergence of the Karaite movement. Within Judaism, this topic constitutes an important halakhic problem for various groups such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, Samaritans, and the Qumran community, making it known for at least a thousand years before the appearance of the Karaites in the 9th century, and possibly as early as the 4th century BCE (Morgenstern 1968, 81, 84, 89).

over the centuries and persist at the same level of substance, dating back to the time of Saadia Gaon (9th/10th centuries).¹⁶ In practice, the dispute between the parties involved in the halakhic conflict in later centuries mainly revolves around invoking the same arguments put forth by Rabbinic and Karaite scholars of Saadia Gaon's era, although both groups also differ in the literary sources upon which these scholars rely. In the case of Shelomo ben Aharon, a key work is the writings of the Karaite scholar Elijah Bashyazi (15th century), titled "The Mantle of Elijah" (אדרת אליהו), from which the author of "The War at the Gates" drew both the accusations of the Karaite side against the Rabbanites regarding the issue of counting the Omer, and the arguments justifying the prevailing position within his own religious group, namely among the Polish-Lithuanian Karaites.

According to Rabbinic and Karaite Judaism, the commandment found in Lev 23:15–16¹⁷ is associated with counting a specific number of weeks and days from the festival of Passover to the Feast of Weeks. Both groups refer to this period as the Omer, as well as the counting of the Omer.¹⁸ The differences between the two denominations revolve around the interpretation of the expression found in both specified biblical verses, namely *mim-moḥoraṭ haš-šabbaṭ* (ממחרת השבת). Let us examine how this issue is presented in the work of Shelomo ben Aharon.

In "The War at the Gates," the first to speak on the discussed matter is a defender of Rabbinic halakha. According to him, the Hebrew expression *mim-moḥoraṭ haš-šabbaṭ* should be understood as "from the day after this holiday," and in the context of the mentioned biblical verse, simply as "from the day after Passover." In his opinion, the term *šabbaṭ* does not appear in this biblical commandment in its most common meaning, i.e. as "the seventh day of the week; the Sabbath," but rather as "a festival, a holiday." Since this expression was used in Lev 23:15 in the context of the festival of Pesach, the word *šabbaṭ* obviously refers to that very holiday. Therefore, in practice, as he continues, the counting of the Omer always begins on the 16th day of the month of Nissan, and thus "from the day after this holiday," namely after Passover, which falls on the 15th day of the month of Nissan.

His opponent, a proponent of Karaite halakha, disagrees with the judgment that it is clear from the biblical text that the beginning of counting the Omer should always fall on the 16th day of the month of Nisan. He is also unconvinced by arguments

¹⁶ See Ben-Shammai 1985:56. The first known Karaite anti-Rabbanite work is the composition of Elijah ben Abraham (12th century) known by the title הלוח הקראים והרבנים ("The division between the Karaites and the Rabbanites").

¹⁷ The Masoretic version of these verses:

15 וספרתם לכם ממחרת השבת מיום הביאכם את-עמר המנופה שבע שבתות תמימת תהינה:

16 עד ממחרת השבת השביעית תספרו חמשים יום והקרבתם מנחה חדשה ליהוה:

¹⁸ The Hebrew term 'omer (עומר) can mean "sheaves of harvested grain" (Deut 24:19; Ruth 2:7), or "the first fruits offered to the priest" (*Midrash Rabbah Leviticus* 28:1; although it's possible that this specifically refers to barley, as mentioned in *Midrash Rabbah Leviticus* 28:3), and the beginning of the harvest season (Ramban, n.d., 16:9); for more information, see Erder 2003, 124–25; Morgenstern 1968, 84–85.

meant to justify that in the specified biblical commandment (i.e. Lev 23:15), the term *šabbat* appears in the sense of “this festival.” He points out that in the analyzed biblical commandment, alongside the noun שבת (*šabbat*), there is the determiner ה (*ha*), indicating that it refers to a known and familiar thing. According to him, this determiner clearly refers to the meaning of the term *šabbat* from the story of the creation of the world (Gen 2:1 ff.),¹⁹ when this concept was first introduced in the Torah. Therefore, its meaning in Lev 23:15 is the same as in the Book of Genesis, namely “the seventh day of the week; Saturday.”

Another clear indication supporting this assumption, as the Karaite scholar continues, can be found in Lev 23:2, just before the introduction of the commandment to count the Omer. In this verse, God defines the meaning of the term *šabbat* used in Lev 23:15 and 23:16, so as to leave no room for doubt. The verse explicitly states: “Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath . . .” (Lev 23:3)²⁰ Therefore, these words, along with the determiner *ha* (in the expression *mim-moḥorat haš-šabbat*), are intended to unequivocally specify the meaning of the concept of *šabbat*, which appears in the verse introducing the moment of the beginning Omer period. This term signifies, as in the story of the creation of the world, “Saturday; Sabbath.”

In his response, the defender of Rabbinic Judaism acknowledges that the argumentation upon which he relies is not drawn from the Bible but rather from tradition (i.e., from the Mishnah and Talmud).²¹ However, he also points out that the position of the Karaites is not entirely certain either. If, as he argues, the meaning of the word *šabbat* in Lev 23:15 is limited to “the seventh day of the week,” namely “Saturday; Sabbath,” as the Karaites maintain, then the question arises as to how one can determine which of the Sabbaths during the festival of Pesach is referred to and from which one should commence counting the Omer. This is because every few years, during the 8-day festival of Pesach, two Sabbaths may occur.

However, the Karaite protagonist of the dispute also makes a similar allegation. Since the Rabbinic authorities maintain that the counting of the Omer begins “the day after this holiday,” on what basis is it assumed that the commandment refers to the first day and not the last day of the festival of Pesach. After all, even the last day of Pesach, i.e. the eighth day, is also celebrated solemnly.

Interestingly, in “The War at the Gates” both questions remain unanswered. The summary of the ongoing discussion between the scholars is as follows: both sides—regardless of the adopted interpretation of the term *šabbat*—encounter

¹⁹ However, it should be emphasized that the word שבת (as the proper name for the day of the week) does not appear in the Genesis narrative mentioned by Shelomo. Instead, the expression “seventh day” (יום השביעי) is used in that context (see: Gen 2:2–3).

²⁰ The Masoretic version of the verse:

שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲשֶׂה מְלָאכָה וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּתוֹן מְקַרְא-קֹדֶשׁ כָּל-מְלָאכָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ שַׁבָּת הוּא לַיהוָה כָּל מוֹשְׁבֵיכֶם.

²¹ See Rashi on Leviticus 23:16.

a similar kind of problem related to justifying their position concerning the ambiguous biblical text. Specifically, Rabbinic authorities must prove that the biblical commandment refers to the first day after Passover, while the Karaites must argue that it refers to the Sabbath falling within the 8-day period of the festival of Passover.²²

As known from the history of Jewish literature, attempts were made to address these issues in various ways. However, Shelomo ben Aharon unfortunately does not introduce detailed considerations in his work, leaving the reader without explanations. Therefore, neither the Karaite nor the Rabbinic protagonist of the dialogue further clarifies these doubts or presents solutions proposed, e.g., in Talmudic literature by Rabbi Akiva.²³

Just like the first day, the last day of the counting of the Omer also sparks heated debates between Rabbinic Judaism and Karaism. In “The War at the Gates” Shelomo ben Aharon extensively addresses this issue as well. The arguments of both sides of the religious dispute can be summarized as follows: According to the Karaite interpretation of Lev 23:16, during the counting of the Omer, one should count 50 days and on the next day, i.e. on the 51st day, present the appropriate offerings for the Feast of Weeks. On the other hand, the Rabbinic authorities hold that it is Rashi who advocates not counting exactly 50 days because the 50th day corresponds to the day of offering sacrifices.²⁴ Thus, according to the Rabbanites, the Omer period comprises 49 days.

The Karaite position is based on the assumption that since there is an accent mark *’etnah* (אֶתְנָה) under the word יום in the verse from Lev 23:16 (תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם), *tisp̄ru ḥamišim yom*, “you shall count fifty days”), indicating the end of the statement, it means that the subsequent part of the biblical command (related to the offering of sacrifices) must refer to the next day. In this part of their argument, the Karaite scholar criticizes Rashi for connecting (by shifting the punctuation-accent mark *’etnah* from the word יום to תִּסְפְּרוּ) the phrase “fifty days” with the ext sentence, i.e., וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַיהוָה (*ve-hiqrab̄tem minḥa ḥadaša la-’adonay*, “and you shall offer a new sacrifice to the LORD”), thus creating a sentence that suggests that the offering should be made on the 50th day, meaning that, in essence, only 49 days are counted. However, according to the Karaite, such changes in the Bible are not allowed, making Rashi’s interpretation unacceptable.

To put it more simply, according to the Karaite reading of the Hebrew text of Lev 23:16, the content of the verse in question in English would look more or less like this:

[15] You shall count off seven equal weeks. [16] On the day after the seventh Sabbath, you shall count fifty days. [And then you] shall present offerings to the LORD.

²² In this work, the issue of why the Karaites do not commence the counting of the Omer from the Sabbath that occurs after the eight-day period of the festival of Pesach is left aside (for more details, see Naeh 1992).

²³ See Naeh 1992, 428–30.

²⁴ The Karaites refer here to Rashi’s commentary on the Book of Leviticus 23:16.

The Rabbinic version of the Hebrew text in English translation, on the other hand, would be as follows:

[15] You shall count off seven equal weeks. [16] Until the day after the seventh Sabbath you shall count. [And then] you shall count off the fiftieth day and present offerings to the LORD.²⁵

According to the Karaite scholar, the very fact of the use of the Hebrew verb לִסְפֹּר ("to count; to count off") in the Torah indicates the necessity of counting (i.e., separating) 50 days, with the actual presentation of the offerings occurring on the subsequent day (i.e., the 51st day) to mark the beginning of the Feast of Weeks. If, indeed, Lev 23:16 intended the offering to be made on the 50th day, there would be no need to formulate the command in the form of a deduction, a separation of these 50 days. It would suffice to stop at the first part of the verse, i.e., the instruction to present an offering to God on the day after the seventh Sabbath (which is after 49 days). In that case, the command to count 50 days would essentially repeat the same information within the same verse. It is self-evident that the day after seven Sabbaths is the 50th day, so there is no need for an additional "counting (off)." However, since the verb "to count" is used in this command, it serves as a clear indication that these 50 days should be treated separately as the entirety of the Omer period, and only after completing it—on the 51st day—should the required offerings be presented.

In addition to the above, the solution to the puzzle related to the meaning of the word שבת lies in the phrase *mim-moḥoraṭ ha-šabbat*. As the Karaite explains, the term cannot have the meaning of "week" in this expression (it is another meaning, in addition to those previously mentioned in the article), because there are no phrases in Hebrew like "tomorrow of the week" or "tomorrow of the month."²⁶ From this, it follows that the Biblical expression can only mean "the day after this Sabbath" (literally "tomorrow of this Sabbath"—in English it is not a correct expression, but in Hebrew it is), thus "the day after Saturday," essentially referring to Sunday.

It is worth noting in this context that the Karaite could not present the above argument when discussing the meaning of the expression *mim-moḥoraṭ ha-šabbat* in relation to the first day of counting the Omer. This is because both the Karaites and the Rabbinites assigned the lexeme שבת the meaning of "one day" at that time (rather than the meaning of "week"). Thus, if the Karaites were of the opinion that at that time the reference was to "the Sabbath" (thus: "the day after this Sabbath," literally:

²⁵ In both examples, the expressions that bear accent mark *ˈetnah*—according to the respective traditions—have been bolded.

²⁶ The linguistic construction that Shelomo has in mind is difficult to render in English because it does not have the expression *במחרת*, which always occurs in Hebrew in the context of one day, not several. It means precisely "the next day" or "the day after." This is the reason why my English translation of this linguistic argument raised by a Karaite scholar may be incomprehensible to the English reader.

“tomorrow of this Sabbath”), while the Rabbanites were of the opinion that the reference was to “the feast day” (thus: “the day after this feast,” literally: “tomorrow of this feast”), then on the grounds of linguistic correctness the dispute between the parties could not be resolved, for both propositions are grammatically correct in Hebrew (i.e., למחרת ההג, למחרת השבת etc.). However, a different situation arises in the case of the disagreement arising from the controversy over choosing between the possibility of “the day after this Sabbath” (literally “tomorrow of this Sabbath” [Karaites]) and “the day after this week” (literally “tomorrow of this week” [Rabbanites]), which occurs in the context of determining the last day of the Omer period. In this case, on the same grounds of linguistic correctness, there can only be one winner in the dispute over the validity of the interpretation of the phrase *mim-moḥoraṭ ha-šabbat*, namely, the Karaite scholar, because in Hebrew, expressions like “tomorrow of the week” or “tomorrow of the month” are not correct.

Roughly, this outlines the essence of the Karaite-Rabbinic dispute regarding the determination of the framework dates of the Omer period, as presented by Shelomo ben Aharon in “The War at the Gates.” What, then, are the analytical conclusions that emerge from the intra-textual analysis of the religious dispute presented in the intellectual dialogue?

The juxtaposition of considerations related to both issues, i.e., the beginning and the end of the Omer period, leads to interesting insights in the realm of internal textual analysis of “The War at the Gates” dialogue. It is immediately noticeable that the phrase *mim-moḥoraṭ ha-šabbat*, used both in Lev 23:15 and in the next verse, in the Karaite interpretation, each time (i.e., in relation to the first and last day of counting of the Omer) has exactly the same meaning, namely: “the next day after this Sabbath.”²⁷

In Rabbinic interpretation, however, it is explained in two different ways: the first time, in connection with Lev 23:15, as “the next day after the Passover,” the second time—in connection with 23:16—already as “the next day after this week.”

Considering the fact that the discussed Torah text also has legal character, one might expect that the meanings of the same terms, especially when they appear in two consecutive verses with a similar grammatical structure, will be the same. The Karaim interpretation corresponds to this intuition²⁸ (although it has a certain problem). According to the Rabbinic way of reading Lev 23:16, the counting of

²⁷ Avraham ibn Ezra was also said to be in favor of this solution, see Weis 1946, 130–131.

²⁸ However, this does not necessarily imply that the Karaites are correct. The Karaim interpretation agrees only and exclusively with a certain philosophy of law, according to which the same terms should always be used in the same sense. The fulfillment of the requirement of consistency in the use of technical terms does not automatically mean being correct, as it is still necessary to prove—and here we return to our case—that the meanings attributed to these terms are correct. Secondly, it is difficult to say to what extent legal biblical texts can be expected to meet the criteria of correctness in legal formulations that are imposed on lawmakers in present times.

50 days is divided into two periods, namely seven weeks (49 days) of the Omer and a period referred to as the "day after" (*mim-moḥoraṭ*) that period (i.e., the 50th day), which is the day when the Festival of Weeks was supposed to begin. This interpretation shows that the Rabbanites are consistent in interpreting the time adverb "the day after": for just as the beginning of the counting of the Omer occurs on "the day after" the first day of Passover (Lev 23:15), so too the Festival of Weeks begins on "the day after" the seven-week counting period (Lev 23:16).

On the other hand, the Karaites do start counting the Omer on "the day after" the Sabbath; however, they commence the Feast of Weeks not on "the day after" seven complete weeks (עד ממחרת השבת השביעית) but on the following day. In essence, this means that the 51st day, the first day of the Feast of Weeks, falls not on "the day after" the period of seven weeks of the Omer but two days later, which is the next day after "the day after" seven full weeks.

In light of the analysis presented here, the question arises as to whether, in both Torah verses, an important element in defining the beginnings of subsequent religious periods (i.e., the Omer and the Feast of Weeks) is essentially not only the way the term *šabbat* is understood but also *moḥoraṭ* ("the next day; the day after") which in legal text, or at least in consecutive sentences, should serve the same function. So, if the expression *ממחרת השבת* in Lev 23:15 signified—for both the Karaites and the Rabbanites—the first day of the Omer, should it not also, analogously to its role in the previous case, be the marker for the beginning of the next period—the Feast of Weeks?

As can be seen, each of the positions presented by Shelomo ben Aharon—i.e., the Karaite and Rabbanite perspectives—has, from the standpoint of internal analytical-argumentative coherence, its unique way of proving its case, in which analytical consistency, especially in the explanation of the same legal-religious concepts, does not always have to play a significant role. Without delving into the broader context of Jewish and Karaite literature, it is challenging to understand the development of religious law among both Rabbinic and Karaite Jews and how it reached its current state.

While the history of Karaite-Rabbanite polemics demonstrates even greater richness in this area, due to which both communities showed not only an excellent knowledge of the Hebrew Bible in general but also exceptional exegetical skills, especially concerning literary analysis, in this particular matter, Shelomo ben Aharon decided to present the differences between the conflicting denominations only to a limited extent, and not always fully exhausting substantively all possible analytical threads.

3. Falsification and Verification of Scientific Claims

The researcher delving into Shelomo ben Aharon's Hebrew-language polemic, titled לחם שערים, encounters an initial serious dilemma: how to interpret its title. Based on the Hebrew Bible, from which Karaites, like other Jewish writers, drew inspiration for titling their philosophical-religious treatises, the above phrase—written with consonantal characters only—can be read in two ways. It can be interpreted either as *lehem šo'orim*, לֶחֶם שְׁעָרִים, meaning “barley bread” (Judg 7:13; 2 Kgs 4:42), or as *lahem šo'arim*, לֶחֶם שְׁעָרִים, which translates to “conflict at the gates; gate skirmish; war at the gates” (Judg 5:8). Almost all contemporary scholars who have encountered the intellectual legacy of the scholar from Poswol advocate for the first interpretation of the title, pointing, among other things, to the similarity with titles of rabbinic halakhic texts.²⁹ On the other hand, upon closer examination of the work's content, especially its “Introduction,” it becomes untenable to maintain that the polemic's title refers to “barley bread.”

In the first part of this subsection, I will endeavor to demonstrate that the title “Barley Bread” is invalid, and subsequently, I will provide evidence that the expression “The War at the Gates” is the correct way to read the words לחם שערים.

The first argument supporting the notion that the titular words לחם שערים should not be interpreted as “barley bread” is the fact that Shelomo ben Aharon never uses this phrase in that sense throughout his polemic. In the poetic introduction to his work, the author at most speaks of “defiled bread, (ritually) impure,” clearly referring the reader to the expression לחם מגאל (*lehem m'go'al*) taken from Mal 1:7. The mentioned biblical passage criticizes priests who offer blemished and dishonest sacrifices on God's altar, such as those from defective animals (Mal 1:8), and which Malachi specifically terms as לחם מגאל.

In his poetic introduction to the polemic, Shelomo, using these biblical passages metaphorically, vividly criticizes Rabbinic halakha, considering it incorrect. According to Shelomo, in the context of the temple's destruction, religious laws (*halakha*) have taken the place of sacrifices. Thus, Shelomo compares the improper observance of Mosaic law by the Rabbanites to unworthy sacrifices offered by priests during Malachi's time. The expression לחם מגאל signifies the erroneous halakha of the Rabbanites in Shelomo ben Aharon's polemic.

However, does this automatically imply that, according to Shelomo ben Aharon, the correct Karaite halakha could be metaphorically termed as “barley bread,” לחם שערים, in opposition to לחם מגאל? It is worth noting that in the context of Shelomo ben Aharon's treatise (discussing incorrect rabbinic religious law) and in the context of the quoted words from the Book of Malachi (“unworthy sacrifices”), the term “barley bread” would have to be attributed, precisely based on a clear opposition,

²⁹ See Akhiezer and Lasker 2011, 101–2, also note 27; Lasker 2014, 411, with note 42 as well.

the meaning of “worthy sacrifice” and further, “correct observance of religious law.” From the point of view of literary analysis, one might find such a proof convincing, since it is internally consistent and logical. However, the problem lies in the fact that this explanation finds no confirmation either in the biblical text or in Shelomo’s text. Firstly, Shelomo, in his work, never uses the phrase *להם שערים* in reference to acceptable Karaite halakha—whether directly or indirectly. Secondly, even in the Hebrew Bible, the expression “barley bread” (see Judg 7:13; 2 Kgs 4:42) is not used in the sense of correct and worthy offerings presented in the temple. And only such a meaning of this biblical expression could provide Shelomo ben Aharon with a solid basis for generalizing that the biblical “barley bread” is, in his contemporary reality, “correct observance of the religious law.”

Thus, in the Hebrew Bible, there is no clear opposition between *lehem še’orim* and *lehem m^go’al* (especially in the sense of offerings made to God) that Shelomo ben Aharon could use in his work as an intellectual-poetic weapon for a sarcastic attack on rabbinic halakha on the one hand and the defense of Karaite halakha on the other.³⁰ Moreover, even in Shelomo ben Aharon’s polemical work itself, he does not use the expression “barley bread” in the sense of the Karaite halakha that he accepts and approves. In other words, he does not, for his literary purposes, create an opposition between *להם שערים* and *להם מגאל* that would relate to the realm of religious law, or to good and evil deeds.

Another argument put forward to defend the position that the expression “barley bread” does indeed constitute the title of the Karaite scholar’s work is the fact that there are quite a few rabbinic works in the field of religious law titled *להם שערים* and read precisely as “barley bread.”³¹ Without delving into the issue of the relationship between the titles of these works and their content, I will only note that Shelomo ben Aharon, in his work, does not refer to these texts, either explicitly or allusively. The only argument that could lead to the assertion that Shelomo ben Aharon interpreted the title of his work as “barley bread” would be the fact that these rabbinic works titled *להם שערים* constitute the name of a genre of a certain type of texts in the

³⁰ The lexeme *še’orim* (in the singular form: *še’ora*) signifies “barley,” which is one of the fundamental grains in the “biblical” period (see, e.g.: Joel 1:11; Judg 31:40; Lev 27:16; Judg 7:13, as well as 2 Sam 14:30; 2 Kgs 4:42; 2 Kgs 7:1, 16, 18, etc.). Barley ripens first of all grains, hence it was offered in the temple at Passover as a sacrifice of the firstfruits of the soil. Additionally, in the Hebrew Bible, barley flour appears as one of the ingredients in the ordeal of the suspected unfaithful wife, accused by her husband (Num 5:15). In another instance, there is a mention of a large barley bread loaf in the dream of a certain man, which, rolling into the camp of the Midianites, overturns and destroys a military tent (Judg 7:13). In this latter case, “barley bread” serves as a literary metaphor for the army chosen by God, and at the same time, a relatively small army of Israel (300 warriors), which triumphs over a much larger enemy (the Midianites).

³¹ For example: (a) *ספר להם שערים* משה, שאול בן משה; (b) *ספר להם שערים* טרעסטינא, ספר להם שערים; (c) *משה ליב בלאאמ”ו מו”ה יוסף שמואל כ”ץ דיין שק”ק ניקאלסבורג*, ספר להם שערים. The texts listed here were written after the death of the Karaite scholar, so it is impossible to speak of their influence on this cleric. I have not been able to find any earlier works of this title that the author of “War at the Gates” might have known, albeit purely hypothetically.

field of religious law (similar to texts of the type שאלות ותשובות, *šə' elot ve-tšubot*). My current knowledge of these mentioned rabbinic texts does not allow for a definitive statement that such a genre developed and that both rabbinic scholars and Shelomo ben Aharon were aware of its existence.

These are roughly the arguments that refute the claim that the title words of Shelomo ben Aharon's work should not be interpreted as "barley bread." Let's now turn to the arguments that support the idea that it indeed refers to a meaning like "war at the gates."

The strongest argument supporting the interpretation that the discussed consonantal title of Shelomo ben Aharon's work should be read as *laḥem šə'arim* ("war at the gates; skirmish at the gates; conflict at the gates" and similar) is the fact that the author of the polemic, in the poetic introduction (in which the words לחם שערים appear the only time in the entire work), quotes a biblical verse containing precisely this expression (Judg 5:8). Furthermore, before the sequence of these words in the poetic prelude, the word אז (then) is also present, and these words in the Hebrew Bible appear together solely in the Song of Deborah (Judg 5:8). It is worth noting that the theme of the biblical passage includes conflict, which is particularly important in the context of Shelomo ben Aharon's prelude.

As I have already noted, the title phrase לחם שערים appears only once in Shelomo's work, indicating that the significance of the title should be especially sought in this exact place. And what is mentioned in it?

Firstly, the mentioned "Introduction" serves as a poetic reflection on the causes of the theological conflict between brothers, namely the Rabbanites and the Karaites. In this section, the author employs a style reminiscent of prophetic books from the Bible, skillfully using various quotations from the Scriptures. However, it should be noted that these quotations do not appear in their biblical context and meaning; instead, the author uses them to construct a new narrative, symbolically depicting the conflicted relations between Rabbanites and Karaites at the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries. Shelomo ben Aharon, in his poetic prelude, conceals himself under the guise of a modest scholar who seeks to understand the reason for the schism between Rabbanites and Karaites, as well as whose religious law aligns with God's Law expressed in the Hebrew Bible. The protagonist's questions are answered by God through a prophetic vision, an inspired revelation. In this vision, the main character witnesses many deviations and sins committed by the believers during the Second Temple period. At the same time, God shows him a small group of individuals who faithfully adhered to God's laws in those distant times, a group that the protagonist identifies with the spiritual forebears of his contemporary Karaites. In subsequent scenes of the vision, a conflict arises between representatives of both groups, the brothers, over which of them promotes laws in line with God's will. It is in this context that the mentioned sage comments on the tense situation with the words (fol. 3v):

[31] [...] על כן התגוללו על לחם שערים³² : ודבתה³³

[32] בהם הפלוגה מחמת שיוצא לפני השליט בשגגה³⁴ : ואשר עמהם רבתי עם³⁵

[31] [...] Therefore, they engage in *war at the gates*,³⁶ and there is a tremendous [32] division among them, all due to *the misguided rule of a leader*³⁷ supported by a *numerous people*.³⁸

It is evident, therefore, that the words לחם שערים in this poetic description carry the meaning of a conflict related to a dispute between brothers. Thus, they have the same significance as in the biblical text from which they were drawn (which is additionally supported—though in only some manuscripts—by the preceding word אז).

Regardless, the content of the poetic introduction aligns with the content of the main parts of the work, which seriously address specific differences in religious law between the Rabbanites and the Karaites. While the title of the work, i.e. לחם שערים, in the poetic prelude alludes to the conflict between fictional brothers, which in the poetic description almost escalates into a fratricidal struggle, in the main part of the work it straightforwardly relates to polemics. This involves a debate between serious scholars defending the righteousness of the religious law of their faith and critiquing the opponent's halakha.

In conclusion, in both cases, that is, concerning the content of the “Introduction” as well as the content of the polemical part of the work, the vocalization of Shelomo ben Aharon's polemic title should indeed be *laḥem šʿarim*, meaning “the war at the gates.” This is because meaning of this expression in the “Introduction” is directly associated with a physical conflict and dispute between brothers. However, in the main part of the work, it symbolically alludes to a form of spiritual-intellectual warfare, meaning debate and polemics.

On this occasion, it is worth emphasizing and sensitizing particularly the younger generations of researchers and students to the importance of a thorough reading of the content of the examined text. This is to avoid inadvertently succumbing to the influence of research traditions that transmit established variants of perceiving

³² The second על is incorrect, as other versions of the text (Elgamil's edition and F8293), along with the corresponding biblical fragment (Judg 5:8), demonstrate that instead of it the word אז should be used. In many manuscripts, these two words are graphically emphasized, precisely because they constitute the title of the work.

³³ Should be ורבתי, probably in the sense of the Aramaic ורבתא. See, e.g., another manuscript (microfilm F53068 from the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem): ורבתי.

³⁴ Eccl 10:5.

³⁵ Lam 1:1.

³⁶ Judg 5:8.

³⁷ Eccl 10:5. In Shelomo's metaphorical language, the word “leader” should be understood as a “spiritual or religious leader.”

³⁸ Lam 1:1.

a given issue through generations or the influence of scientific authorities who, after all, may make errors here and there. As Karl Popper used to say, practicing science largely involves an approximate movement toward the truth, which means constant verification or falsification of accepted scientific statements. I quietly hope that with this small correction concerning the issue discussed in this part of the article has brought me a bit closer to understanding what Shelomo ben Aharon intended when he decided to title his polemic להם שעררים.

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to present selected research problems related to the reading and analysis of “The War at the Gates” by Shelomo ben Aharon. Additionally, I sought to demonstrate the diversity and complexity of research problems faced by researchers of any Hebrew texts who seek to understand the intellectual reality that shaped the daily lives of millions of Jews in the past. The article briefly focused on a cross-sectional analysis of a Karaite literary document, examining its content and structure (the issue of intertextuality layering leading to the distortion of the meaning of a given statement), argumentation (presenting the linguistic and logical consequences of both sides of the theological dispute alongside a legal analysis of the biblical text), and research methodology (adopting a new interpretation of the title’s meaning and rejecting the previous proposition of its translation). The conclusions drawn while addressing these issues are as follows:

- 1) The content of “The War at the Gates” by Shelomo ben Aharon is, in many of its aspects, incomprehensible, and it is worthwhile to make researchers aware that this is also a characteristic feature of many other Hebrew Jewish texts. An honest researcher, in the process of analyzing a literary text and its translation, should be able to admit that there are places in the work where, at a given stage of knowledge about it, a credible interpretation or translation is not possible. They should be able to identify these unclear elements in the work and then put forth cautious hypotheses—along with appropriate argumentation—regarding their potential explanation.
- 2) Given that the Jewish works that we analyze are not always semantically unambiguous, it is crucial to carefully consider the interpretations of other scholars, regardless of their authority. This is not about a matter of unduly challenging recognized scientific truths, but about rationally verifying claims that, in the past, were indeed correctly derived but in a different, incomplete set of empirical data. When new data emerges, such statements should be updated.
- 3) It is worth keeping in mind, therefore, that many scientific claims—including those in the field of Jewish studies—are of a temporary rather than definitive

nature. This phenomenon does not indicate a weakness of the scientific field being practiced, but rather its strength, as it highlights the need to continue practicing it in order to deepen knowledge and achieve a better understanding of human civilization and culture on one hand, and to improve research methods on the other.

- 4) The laborious task of working with hypotexts (as demonstrated in the article, even with multiple intertexts at a time), which are also highly ambiguous and enigmatic even for professional researchers, in effort to understand the meaning of the text that relies on them, always yields positive results. A vast amount of Jewish texts, especially in the realm of halakha, but also in biblical analysis, cannot be properly understood without engaging with potential hypotexts. Therefore, it is crucial to educate future researchers on how to use them correctly.

I believe that these few observations, arising from the analysis of such an inconspicuous text by a Karaite scholar from times long past are enough to encourage a new generation of Hebraists to embark on serious studies of the rich and diverse Jewish culture, both in terms of ideas and as an intellectual challenge.

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