This book is an ethnographic study of the women of the Karaite community of the San Francisco Bay Area. The author befriended members of the community and spent years visiting their homes and their synagogue until she was more or less accepted as one of them. She was able to delve quite deeply into personal matters, such as menstruation, childbirth, and lactation that are very rarely discussed in public, certainly not with outsiders. The author recorded her conversations with these women and many are transcribed in the book, which grew out of the author’s doctoral dissertation at UC Berkeley. Because field studies of Karaite communities are relatively rare, especially in the English language, the present study is a welcome addition to the literature on modern Karaism. It disappoints, however, because of numerous deficiencies which will be discussed below.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of Karaite history and historiography. Subsequent chapters address the idea of purity in Karaism and the prohibition of sexual relations on the Sabbath; menstruation; mother-daughter teaching of menstruation; the menstruating woman in public situations (synagogue services, communal celebrations); attitudes to the menstruating woman; the encounter between the menstruating woman and the lactating woman; and the attitude to mother’s milk within the context of the Karaite dietary laws.

Whereas in Rabbinic halakhah many of the biblical laws of purity outlined in Leviticus 12 (for a woman giving birth) and Lev. 15:19 (a menstruating woman) are in abeyance since the destruction of the Temple, for Karaites they are still in effect. The menstruating woman in Rabbinic circles is only forbidden physical contact with her husband, and otherwise can go about her business. According to Karaite halakhah, a menstruating woman is impure and can transmit her impurity to anyone or anything she comes in contact with. Therefore, when a woman has her period, she must separate herself from her family and community and forego direct contact with them. Entry into the synagogue is forbidden as is participation in family celebrations. This can lead to some awkward situations. Tsoffar describes the case of one woman who was not able to be in the synagogue during her son’s bar mitzvah celebration because she was menstruating. This caused her considerable distress. In another case, a woman who was not particularly observant had her period before Passover and was therefore unable to participate fully in the Seder celebration. She was required to sit at a separate table and could not interact directly with the others. She felt humiliated. But most of the women accept their traditions and make the best of them. The purity laws set them apart and distinguish their community from the Rabbanites.

Living as a minority within a minority in a highly assimilating environment, however, has taken its toll. Some of the women, especially those with more education and who work outside the home no longer adhere to the Karaite laws very strictly. It will be
interesting to see how the next generation fares and whether the young couples marrying
now will maintain these laws, which most modern women would find degrading.
As this is an ethnographic study, the author has couched her research in the jargon of the
field and this unfortunately results in making the book less accessible to the general
reader. Another problem is the author’s writing style, which may be a function of a poor
command of the English language. For both reasons, the book would have benefitted
from the services of a competent copy-editor.
Another problem is the author’s pronouncements on Karaites and Karaism. The author
seems to have read widely in the field, but probably would have benefited from
consulting with an expert as well. Much of what the author says about the Karaites would
apply to many other traditional societies, a point that is not acknowledged in the study.
Furthermore, some of the statements made about Karaism are puzzling and sometimes
downright erroneous. For example, the book opens with the following statement:
Karaite culture is a reading community: first was the Bible, and then came the
sect; first was reading, and then came identity. Given their historical formation,
_Kara’im_ are _kor’im_, that is Karaites read or Karaites are readers. True to their
cosmopolitan Egyptian origin, contemporary Karaites are well versed in French,
Arabic, Italian, Turkish, and English, converse among themselves in Egyptian
Arabic and read in Hebrew. Women also read, and the gender-specific term
_Kara’iyot_ designates women readers. Within Karaite culture, reading is the prism
through which Karaites perceive themselves. As the sect’s marker of difference,
reading expresses the distinctiveness of the group from its early ideological
formation. As such reading is an act that produces body and text; it produces the
Karaite way of life. Methodologically, reading becomes the paradigm for
understanding, representing, and articulating the community today (p. 1).
But what does it mean to say that Karaites are readers and how does this distinguish them
from other groups, Jewish or non-Jewish? In fact Tsoffar gives very little evidence that
the women she interviews were particularly well-read or well-versed in Karaite lore.
Most likely, what they know they learnt by word of mouth from their mothers, other
family members and friends. Do the Karaites only read in Hebrew, which is here
implied? Are the Karaites only males which is also implied, women having another
name? How does reading produce text? One has to have a text before one reads.
Another example: “Karaite Jewish women bear the responsibility within the community
to impart laws and tradition [sic] of menstruation, birth, holidays, home life, and the
living experience of the oral Torah” (p. 5). What oral Torah is the author talking about?
To talk about oral Torah in the Karaite context is disorienting, since the Karaites are
known for their opposition to the Oral Torah of the Rabbis. The author seems to be
referring to the oral traditions and customs of the community, but couching it in these
terms (living experience of the oral Torah) is misleading.
Yet another problem is the author’s treatment of Karaite history. The author states that
“Karaite history has been problematic for several reasons. To start with, it is difficult to
differentiate between Jewish history at large and Karaite history in particular” (p. 25). At
least part of the difficulty, she states, “lies in the paucity of manuscripts and other
artifacts, few of which are attested by the extant documents” (ibid.).
I am at a loss to understand why it would be difficult to distinguish the history of the
Karaites from that of the Rabbanites, since the former are a very insular community with
distinct practices and their own institutions. Furthermore, it is simply wrong to say there is a paucity of Karaite manuscripts. In fact there are thousands, the richest collection being in the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg. These manuscripts are being studied assiduously by scholars around the world and are steadily yielding much new information about the Karaites, their history, culture, beliefs, and practices. Occasionally the author seems to misread her sources and find anti-Karaite bias where none exists. For example, when discussing the prohibition of seething a kid in its mother’s milk, the author accuses Rabbinic scholarship of (mis)reading the “other.” “In general, the Karaites are represented in a dark light, often referred to by such incomplete, obscure, and dubious terms as ‘anonymous Karaite’ or as “lacking in sense,” an epithet apparently used by Ibn Ezra and later picked up by Abarbanel and Luzzatto; (p. 187). She attributes this language to the Rabbanites’ aversion to the Karaites’ permissive practice of mixing milk and meat. This is highly unlikely. The anonymous Karaite in the seventeenth century must have indeed been unidentified. Ibn Ezra’s reference to another one … lacking in sense has nothing to do with the seventeenth-century quote. And Abarbanel and Luzzatto didn’t apply the “epithet” to the Karaites, but rather to the explanation that gedi is derived from meged. And all this is in Haran, 28n15, not 29, as cited incorrectly by the author (ibid.). This is just one example of many that could be adduced of the author’s sloppiness in reading and interpreting her sources. This is not to say that there has not been anti-Karaite bias or criticism of Karaism in rabbinic literature. But the above cited examples do not make this point.

The author’s main innovation is her concept of ethno-reading, which seems to refer to a way of studying behaviors and customs in order to learn about the group’s values and traditions. Reading the bodies of Karaite women enables the author to draw conclusions about the women’s role in their community and their relationship with each other. It is an interesting perspective, but the application is marred by numerous inaccuracies such as those noted above.

In sum, this book does provide some insight into the internal relations and dynamics of an insular community and this is a valuable contribution. However, the author’s shaky knowledge of Karaism and its history and lack of care in interpreting her source material detract from the quality of her work and call into question some of her conclusions.