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Report on the Master of Sacred Music Written Project Submitted by
Donna Goldstein

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Investiture

"I am a Harp for thy Songs": The Poetry of Judah Halevi

Donna Goldstein's thesis represents an enormous amount of background reading and research as well as an extremely well-organized and lucid writing style. Each of her four chapters -- bibliography, love songs, songs of Zion and religious poetry -- is developed intelligently and with a very fine eye for relevant data in the vast secondary material she consulted. Details of the biography of Halevi have been widely explored and debated, and Ms. Goldstein has reflected the loving attention given to every facet of this most beloved of Jewish personalities.

Ms. Goldstein had the benefit of using the fine study by Raymond Scheindl in her comments on nature and love in Halevi's love songs. For the Zionist she expanded her purview to include historical and philosophical material, particularly from the kuzari. The allusions in many of these poems are frequently esoteric, and I feel that Donna has done well in explicating these. In the last chapter, on Halevi's religious poetry, there was hardly any secondary literature to draw upon for assistance in interpretation. Here Ms. Goldstein allowed herself to respond emotionally and intuitively to the voice of the poet. The musical sources which she found in such abundance clearly were of help in enabling her to pinpoint the most expressive and impressive passages. In sum, it was a pleasure working with Ms. Goldstein and a delight to read the exemplary paper which she has submitted.

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אני כנור לשיריך

"I AM A HARP FOR THY SONGS"

THE POETRY OF JUDAH HALEVI

DONNA GOLDSTEIN

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Master of Sacred Music Degree

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
School of Sacred Music
New York, New York

March 27, 1989
Advisor: Dr. Stanley Nash

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CHAPTER 1

THE LIFE OF JUDAH HALEVI

Judah Halevi, born in 1075 in Toledo, Spain, is considered to be one of the greatest of all post-Biblical poets. Through poetry, Halevi was able to express very beautifully the deepest emotions, ideals, and aspirations of the Jewish people.¹ His life and words were truly an expression of his love for Israel, a passion which remained a dominant force in him throughout his life.

Halevi was born fourteen years before the First Crusade at a time when the finest group of scholars since Biblical times flourished in Arabic Spain. The Jews of Islam were allowed to become part of the culture and enjoyed considerable toleration. This period is unique in that the Jews reached a peak of achievement in many aspects of their life, including literature and philosophy. The years 950-1200 are often referred to as The Golden Age of Spain.² This period was characterized by spiritual and artistic creativity, unmatched

¹ Michael Alper, "Yehudah Halevi: The Great National Hebrew Poet," in Yehudah Halevi: Sweet Singer of Zion, (New York: Zionist Organization of America, 1941), p. 6.

² David Goldstein, Hebrew Poems From Spain (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), introduction.

in its accomplishments. Ibn Gabirol, Rashi, Alfasi, Moses ibn Ezra, Abraham ibn Ezra, Maimonides, and of course, Judah Halevi are all representative of this remarkable rebirth of culture in Spain.

Toledo was, at the time of Halevi's birth, part of the northern half of Spain which was ruled by Christians, while the southern part of Spain was ruled by Moors or Moslems. The Jews of Spain were tolerated by the Moors and even by the Christians of the country. The influence of the Jews was important for both sides to consider. The reconquering of Spain by the Christians from the Moslems is known as the Reconquista. The Arab ruling classes were eliminated by the Christians but the Jews "...as politically innocuous and economically valuable, were treated with indulgence..."³

The court Jews and the heads of the Jewish community were always in the precarious position of pleading and negotiating with the political powers to find conditions more favorable for the Jews. Many Jews held high positions in the government and in the courts of the Christian Kings. Many of these cultured Jews remained loyal to their faith, while pursuing philosophy, science and literature. As one scholar put it: "This union of two almost antithetical forces is

³ Henry Slonimsky, "Yehudah Halevi: Genius of Judaism," in Yehudah Halevi: Sweet Singer of Zion, (New York: Zionist Organization of America, 1941), p. 12.

absolutely unparalleled in Jewish history."⁴ Judah Halevi was born into this upper stratum of court Jewry⁵ in Toledo, which remained for all of Halevi's life the outpost of Christian Spain.

It was in Toledo that Halevi began his education. His studies included Hebrew, Bible, Arabic, Algebra, Astronomy, the Castillian language, contemporary poetry and poetic technique.⁶ Abrahams tells us in his book, Jewish Life in The Middle Ages, that "...up to the thirteenth year the education of Jewish boys all over was practically identical. Religion was the foundation of the school curriculum, and the training that the child received was designed to form his character as well as his mind."⁷ The study of Hebrew grammar was taught as a special subject in Spain and Italy.⁸ After the age of thirteen, a boy would begin study of such subjects as Arithmetic, Astronomy, Medicine, Geometry, Algebra, and at fifteen, the study of Talmud would begin.

A broad interest was taken by the Jews of the Golden Age of Spain in religious as well as secular subjects. They became especially interested in "...the study of their own

⁴ David Druck, Yehudah Halevy: His Life and Works (New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1941), p. 2.

⁵ Stonimsky, "Yehudah Halevi," p. 12.

⁶ Druck, Yehudah Halevy, p. 21.

⁷ Israel Abrahams, Jewish Life in The Middle Ages (London: Routledge, 1895), p. 357.

⁸ Ibid., p. 358.

Hebrew language, strangely neglected for several centuries."⁹

Traditional lore was as important as secular culture. Although Arabic was the native language of Spain, Hebrew poetry became a branch of Jewish education. During this time, the philosophers wrote mostly in Arabic, translating Greek and Latin works in order to spread culture. The poets, however, wrote in Hebrew. Arabic poetry was taken as a model by the Jews, and a new Hebrew style was created to express the Jews' experience.¹⁰

The Jewish poet was able to imitate the Muslim style of writing using his own Hebrew language. From where did the poet take his subject matter? According to Neal Kozody: "At his spiritual core the courtier was bibliocentric. If from the Greeks he took his philosophy, from the Arabs his rhetorical forms, he took from the Bible the knowledge of who he truly was."¹¹ The Jewish poet could use the Bible as an aesthetic model and as a model of history. Biblical phrases, grammatical forms, diction and imagery became an integral part of Jewish medieval poetry. Chosenness, enslavement, exodus, revelation, sovereignty, exile and redemption were now to be understood and described in "present day" terms.¹²

⁹ Druck, Yehuda Halevy, p. 21.

¹⁰ Goldstein, Hebrew Poems From Spain, introduction.

¹¹ Neal Kozody, "Reading Medieval Hebrew Love Poetry," American Jewish Studies Review, Vol. II (1977), p. 115.

¹² Ibid., pp. 115-17.

It was in Spain, for the first time in the literary history of the Jews, that people made a living from writing poetry. Many poets depended on the generosity of patrons for financial support. Patrons included wealthy educated Jews such as those who held official positions in the community, financiers, and physicians.¹³ A poet would compose for weddings, births, circumcisions, investitures in office, recovery from illness, funerals, and do personal correspondence for the patron.¹⁴ Through one's writing, the poet was even able to influence public opinion. "Poetry was a strong weapon in the Middle Ages and the poet had formidable means of exerting pressure on his fellow men by holding them up to ridicule and shame."¹⁵

Poems that were well received were copied or memorized, and then passed on to others. In this highly cultured society "poetry gatherings" were very fashionable and were a chance for poets to demonstrate their skills. To prove one's merit, the poet had to imitate a complicated poem while retaining its exact form. Although poetry was written with the intention of its being read publicly, great value was placed on its physical appearance. Beautiful parchment was carefully selected and a special black ink was used to make the writing

¹³ Jefim Schirmann, "The Function of the Hebrew Poet in Medieval Spain," in Jewish Social Studies, No. 1 [Vol. XVI] (1954), pp. 235-36.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 240.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 244.

stand out.¹⁶

At the approximate age of fifteen, Halevi was ready to learn more about the world and was sent by his father to the best Jewish school of the time. It was in Lucena, southern (Mohammedan) Spain and was the famous Talmudic Academy of Rabbi Issac Alfasi. Halevi not only studied Talmud in Lucena, but acquired a knowledge of Greek, Latin, and medicine which later became his profession.¹⁷ In Lucena, Halevi was held in high esteem "...for his sound and diversified knowledge, for his honor and his ability at anecdotes and epigrams, an ability which was to win him wide friendships later."¹⁸ Halevi took in everything Arabic culture had to offer in science, philosophy and the poetic arts. This was also a period of his life where he could simply enjoy life and love.¹⁹

Hebrew poetry was clearly the part of Judah's education which most attracted him and was a favorite amusement among cultured society in Spain. He obtained early proficiency in the art of poetry and his fame spread quickly.²⁰ Several of Halevi's early poems deal with friendship, the grandeur of

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 246-50.

¹⁷ Alper, "Yehudah Halevi," p. 6.

¹⁸ Druck, Yehudah Halevy, p. 28.

¹⁹ Slonimsky, "Yehudah Halevi," p. 11.

²⁰ Joseph Jacobs, "Jehuda Halevi, Poet and Pilgrim," Paper read before the Jews' College Literary Society, March 13, 1887, p. 5.

nature, wine, the delights and woes of love, wedding odes, eulogies and riddles. It was quite fashionable at social gatherings to entertain with riddles.

What is it that's blind with an eye in its head
And the race of mankind its use cannot spare.
Spends all its life clothing the dead,
But always itself is naked and bare.

[A Needle]

Happy lovers learn our law,
Be joined in one as we.
Aught that parts us through we saw
And again are one, you see.

[Pair of Scissors]²¹

Halevi's talent came to the attention of the younger poet, Moses ibn Ezra, after Halevi successfully imitated one of his more complicated poems at a poetry writing contest in Cordova, a cradle of Jewish culture in Spain.²² This led to a deep lifelong friendship between the two men, and Halevi spent much time with Moses ibn Ezra at his home in Granada. Moses ibn Ezra was the chief literary authority of Spanish Jewry at that time and made these remarks in referring to Halevi's poetry:

How can a boy so young in years
Bear such a weight of wisdom sage,
Nor 'mongst the graybeards find his peers
While still in the very bloom of age?²³

²¹ Idem.

²² Article "Judah Halevy" in Encyclopedia Judaica (First Edition, 1972), Vol. X, col. 355.

²³ Alper, "Yehudah Halevi," p. 6.

In his great wisdom, ibn Ezra also said of Halevi that he was "a star come forth from Castille (northern Spain) destined to illumine the world."²⁴ It was in Granada that Halevi wrote his first important poems which reflect the easy going, hedonistic life style of his early years.²⁵ Judah Halevi lived in Granada for a number of years, making acquaintances and establishing correspondences with scholars, poets and thinkers.

After the Almohades of Africa invaded Spain, the condition of the Jews deteriorated. "[Halevi] witnessed one Jewish community after another going down in destruction as it was caught between two fires..."²⁶ Whoever was the winner in the struggles of the Reconquista, Israel was bound to lose. We see a new set of poems by Halevi depicting worsening conditions in Spain. He laments the loss of Jerusalem to the Crusaders, and he speaks of the struggles of awaiting the Messiah. In over 350 piyyutim, Halevi reflects the tragic sufferings of the Jewish people. In hopes of better conditions, Halevi then returned to Toledo and practiced medicine profitably as a court physician. "Like many of his fellow Jews at that time, he trusted that the status and influence of the Jewish nobles and community leaders who were

²⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁵ Encyclopedia Judaica, "Judah Halevy," col. 355.

²⁶ Slonimsky, "Yehuda Halevi," p. 13.

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close to the royal house would ensure security, and peace for the Jews in Christian lands."²⁷ In Toledo Halevi spent his time practicing medicine, teaching Hebrew language at an academy which he founded, and writing poetry.

There are conflicting reports on Halevi's family. It is possible that he had two sons and two daughters, but three of the children died when they were young. We know that when he made his decision to emigrate to Israel, he sadly left behind only one daughter and a son-in-law. Halevi's fame had spread throughout Spain as well as to other countries. He maintained contact with Jewish and non-Jewish nobles, dignitaries and communities in North Africa, Egypt and Narbonne. He was also engaged in trade with Jewish merchants in Egypt.²⁸

As Halevi's philosophy developed, intellectually and emotionally Spain was no longer the place where Halevi could live. He longed for Eretz Yisrael, for only in the land of his ancestors could the relationship between God and Israel be satisfied. Perhaps Halevi's most famous poems, his songs of Zion, touch us the most. But Halevi's longings are passionate and overwhelming. It was the right climate to look towards a Messiah for deliverance. Halevi was able to express the innermost emotions and longings of the Jewish

²⁷ Encyclopedia Judaica, "Judah Halevy," col. 356.

²⁸ Idem.

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people. It is surmised that in 1140, Halevi left Spain to seek his heart's desire - Jerusalem.²⁹

Before departing for Eretz Yisrael, Halevi completed his book of philosophy, entitled The Kuzari. Halevi worked on this single volume for twenty years. It contains his philosophies of Judaism as well as a rejection of Aristotelian philosophy. The Kuzari has been translated into Hebrew, English, Latin, Spanish, German, French and Italian.³⁰

Halevi set out on the arduous journey to Palestine from Cadiz, a leading port of Andalusia. As we know from many of his poems depicting the stormy sea, the trip was long and difficult. As the ship did not stay on course due to stormy weather, it stopped at the Egyptian port of Alexandria. Although disappointed, Halevi remained in Alexandria from Succoth to Chanukah.³¹ Finally Halevi left Egypt and set out in a small boat down the Nile. He made stops at Tyre and Damascus in Syria and desperately continued on, determined to achieve his goal. Halevi's most famous song of Zion, "Ode to Zion," was written in Damascus. Although seeing the many sufferings of the Jews in history, Halevi still retained hope that his people would see freedom again in the land of Zion.³²

²⁹ Jacobs, "Jeduha Halevi," pp. 13-14.

³⁰ Encyclopedia Judaica, "Judah Halevy," cols. 362-63.

³¹ Druck, Yehudah Halevy, pp. 86-88.

³² Ibid., pp. 96-97.

After Damascus, history has no record of what happened to Halevi. In 1141, according to legend, Halevi reached the gates of Jerusalem, and while kissing the dust of Zion, he was slain by an Arab horseman. "Like Moses in the Bible, Yehudah Halevi was only destined to glimpse The Holy Land but not to dwell therein. And like Moses, no one knows his resting place till this day."³³ In the mind of his admirers, Halevi had lived an ideal life, and this folk legend provided for them an ideal death, making him a hero and martyr for all of Jewry.

As a paper of this size cannot begin to do justice to the over 800 poems Halevi wrote, poetry of three of the major categories of Halevi's poems will be highlighted. Chapter II will include some of Halevi's secular poetry, covering themes of friendship, love, and nature. The third chapter will be devoted to the famous songs of Zion, and where appropriate, Halevi's philosophy of Judaism, will be discussed. The last chapter will be devoted to his many religious poems, particularly those included in our liturgy. It is hoped that through an understanding of these secular, religious and Zionist poems, we can begin to appreciate the genius that belonged to one man - Judah Halevi.

³³ Alper, "Yehudah Halevi," p. 10.

CHAPTER II

LOVE SONGS

As previously stated, Arabic poetry was the model for the Jewish medieval poet. Hebrew medieval love poetry is characterized by a stylized form and conventional content.³⁴ The themes of the pining lover, the cruelty of the beloved, and the exaltation of feminine beauty are common to both Arabic and Hebrew love poetry of this time. The love celebrated in this genre takes on its own form as a representation of the "ideal" of love. It is not the individual expressing himself that concerns the reader of the poem. It is the shared feelings of the observer that give the poem its worth.³⁵

The form of the typical medieval Hebrew love poem is that of the Arabic "ghazal," a short poem of classical meter and rhyme, usually four to six verses in length.³⁶ The poem "Leil Gil'ta," by Judah Halevi, is a descriptive poem following the pattern of a ghazal. Most of Halevi's love poems are addressed to a deer or gazelle as a symbol of the beloved.

³⁴ Raymond Scheindlin, Wine, Women, and Death (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1986), p. 77.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 78.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 80.

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The night the girl gazelle displayed to me
Her cheek - the sun - beneath its veil of hair,
Red as a ruby, and beneath a brow
Of moistened marble (color wondrous fair!)
I fancied, her the sun, which rising reddens
Clouds of morning with its crimson flare.³⁷
Judah Halevi

Halevi selects physical elements of his heart's desire and describes them through comparisons and figures of speech.³⁸ In these few short verses the brilliance of her red hair and her glowing complexion remind the poet of the sun. As in the typical descriptive love poem, the love object is hard-hearted and incapable of returning affection. Her frigidity is expressed in this poem by her hair - a veil that separates her from others, and her cheeks which are likened to stone. The image of the radiating sun in the closing verse stands in contrast to the gazelle, who is bright as the sun but cool as stone.³⁹ Halevi masterfully depicts the object of his affection as desirable, beautiful and inviting, but cold to the touch.

Another of Halevi's love poems: "Unto The Stars To Reach Thee," is an example of his feelings and attitudes typical of petitionary love poetry. The petitionary love poem may be

³⁷ Scheindlin, Wine, Women and Death, p. 119.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 81.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 121.

descriptive, but the poem primarily deals with lover's feelings about the beloved.⁴⁰

Unto The Stars To Reach Thee

Would that morning might pursue me with
the wind
That kisseth her mouth and swayeth her body;
And would the clouds might bear to her my
greeting-
Then, like her frame, so would the hardness
of her heart be moved.
Thou gazelle, that choosest to rest upon the
stars,
Have pity upon him who must fly unto the
stars to reach thee.⁴¹

Judah Halevi

It is not uncommon for Halevi and other poets of this period to use features of the landscape and nature to bear greetings. The wind and the clouds are the lofty messengers of love for this unapproachable feminine beauty. She is as removed as the stars - as lofty as the lover is lowly. And again we see the beloved referred to as a gazelle who is seen not as an individual, but as a shared experience.⁴²

The mood of the poem is somber. The poet petitions his beloved by speaking of his suffering as proof of his worthiness. The lover is so affected by her beauty and his sensitivity so great that he submits to the power of her

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 84.

⁴¹ Nina Salaman, Selected Poems of Jehudah Halevi (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1924), p. 63.

⁴² Scheindlin, Wine, Women and Death, p. 86.

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beauty. He is filled with self-pity. The gazelle remains indifferent while the poet pleads that the hardness of her heart be moved. This form of expression is in the Golden Age of Spain, an affirmation of beauty as a cardinal value of the spiritual life.⁴³

We have no way of knowing as we interpret Halevi's love poetry, if the poems come from personal experience or if they are simply artistic compositions.⁴⁴ It is not hard to imagine, however, the sight of beautiful slave girls in medieval Spain, standing by a brook or well, washing their clothes.⁴⁵

Ofra

Ofra does her laundry with my tears
And spreads it out before her beauty's rays.
With my two eyes she needs no flowing well;
Nor sun needs she: Her face provides the blaze.⁴⁶
Judah Halevi

By now the themes and images of Halevi's love poetry are familiar. Ofra, another affectionate term for a female fawn, is described in the third person. We know that she's beautiful and has caused her admirer to shed tears. The reader

⁴³ Ibid., p. 85.

⁴⁴ Encyclopedia Judaica, "Judah Halevi," col. 358.

⁴⁵ Scheindlin, Wine, Women and Death, p. 127.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 126.

is struck by the image of the poet's tears washing her garments. Ofra can arouse feelings of love in others, but she, herself, is never described as being in love or capable of love. We hope that the radiance of beauty will create the warmth of love, but again, her sunshine is only a utilitarian warmth, suitable for drying laundry. The image of the sun continues to be something that gives light and warmth, but is remote. It has power over us and we are reminded that we are but humble mortals.⁴⁷

It is interesting to note that however passionate Halevi's love poetry may be, the nature of the love expressed remains sensual and not sexual. The poem is not meant to show physical and spiritual love between two souls, but rather the adulation of the adored who remains unattainable.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 84.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 86.

CHAPTER III

SONGS OF ZION

As a preface to a discussion of Halevi's Zionist poetry, it is worthwhile to explore in more detail the situation of the Jews in Christian Spain. The Christian Crusades had begun in France and Germany where Jews were being murdered and tortured. The Jews of Spain had escaped this plight but were now being pressured by the Moslems to convert.⁴⁹ Both the Moslems and Christians threatened death at the stake to Jews who resisted accepting their religion. Halevi was shocked by the persecutions as the pretenses of pity and humanitarianism were quickly discarded. "He felt crushed by the hypocrisy of those who preached the love of man and practiced brutality..."⁵⁰ The Jews were caught between two hostile powers who were both claiming the land made holy by the Jewish people.⁵¹ Halevi expressed the sentiments of Jews of all generations since the destruction of the Temple in the year 70. Halevi chose to assert the dream of all Jews at this desperate and hopeless time.⁵² The songs of Zion are the

⁴⁹ Alper, "Yehudah Halevi," p. 8.

⁵⁰ Druck, Yehudah Halevy, p. 61.

⁵¹ Alper, "Yehudah Halevi," p. 8.

⁵² Henry Slonimsky, "The Philosophy of Jehudah Halevi," in Jewish Frontier, (1941), p. 15.

songs of an agonized people, calling for redemption from its tribulations.⁵³

The period in which Halevi composed his famous songs of Zion parallels the development of his philosophy of Judaism. He must have wondered: "Why do Jews suffer untold persecutions and why are they scattered throughout the world?" Halevi's nationalism was rooted in his faith in Judaism and in the Jewish people.

To give meaning to the untold sufferings of the Jewish people and to answer those who defamed the Jewish religion, Halevi wrote a book entitled, The Kuzari—The Defense Of A Despised Religion. It was written in Arabic, the language of the masses. It was named after the Khazars, a Turkish people who had converted to Judaism more than two hundred years before Halevi's time. The three main characters in the book, a Jew, a Mohammedan and a Christian all seek through argument to convert each other.⁵⁴ Halevi utilized the dialogue form, which was a popular vehicle for writing in the Middle Ages.

The Kuzari tries to combat the enlightened, rationalist Greek philosophy that most Jews had accepted in place of their ancestral religion.⁵⁵ Halevi's premise is that the Jewish religion could not be attained through the intellectual reasoning of the philosophers but "...it was acquired by

⁵³ Druck, Yehudah Halevy, p. v.

⁵⁴ Alper, "Yehudah Halevi," p. 8.

⁵⁵ Slonimsky, "The Philosophy of Jehudah Halevi," p. 15.

tradition, by the accumulated historic experience of the Jewish people, and by phenomena and events recorded in the Torah." ⁵⁶ The historic revelation of events being retold from one generation to another began with the Patriarchs who were in touch with Divine Thought.

Halevi was the first Jewish Thinker to expound the idea that the Jews were uniquely selected by God as His Chosen People. Being chosen by God to reflect the highest standards of ethics and morality, the Jews must suffer more than their neighbors as the price of distinction. "The Jews," he says, "are among the nations as the heart is among the other organs of the body. Since the heart sustains the greatest share of bodily pain, the Jew, who is the heart of the nations, similarly suffers most."⁵⁷ By dispersing the Jews to the far corners of the earth, the Jews, as a God-bearing people of history, could enlighten the world.

In taking his philosophy of chosenness one step further, Halevi develops the idea of Israel as a Holy Land chosen by God for the Jewish people. The sanctity of the land and the people also encompasses their language. This ancient language, Hebrew, had been chosen by God to express His Law and send forth word of the Prophets. It was Halevi's hope that the law

⁵⁶ Druck, Yehudah Halevy, p. 70.

⁵⁷ Harry Fein, "Yehudah Halevi: Poet and Philosopher," Paper delivered at the Boston Jewish Book Week Program, Boston Public Library, 1940.

of the Jewish people, their land and their language would be restored to its full splendor of moral perfection.⁵⁸

Halevi is the national poet of Judaism. His Zionist poetry discovers the beauties and perfections of the Jewish people as he masterfully expresses the longing and love for Eretz Yisrael. As the dream of fair women had moved the poet in the past, Zion was now his inspiration.⁵⁹

Halevi gives expression to his longing for Zion in the poem "My Heart is in the East."

My heart is in the east, and I in the
 uttermost west-
 How can I find savour in food? How shall it
 be sweet to me?
 How shall I render my vows and my bonds,
 while yet
 Zion lieth beneath the fetter of Edom,
 and I in Arab chains?
 A light thing would it seem to me to leave all
 the good things of Spain-
 Seeing how precious in mine eyes it is to behold
 the dust of desolate sanctuary.⁶⁰

The sincere tone of these lines gives them much passion and a sense of desperation. The poet's longing eventually overcame every other feeling of his soul, and he set out on his arduous voyage to Zion.

Joseph Jacobs describes Halevi's passion for Jerusalem as "akin to the thinker's love for his own ideals, or better

⁵⁸ Druck, Yehudah Halevy, p. 74.

⁵⁹ Benammi, "The Nationalism of Yehuda Halevi," in The Jewish Chronicle, (August, 1931), p. 13.

⁶⁰ Salaman, Poems of Jehudah Halevi, p. 2.

still, to the passionate devotion of a saint to his creed. Jerusalem was the symbol and a type of all that was distinctive of the history of his race. It was an incarnation of its glorious past, a constant reminder of its woebegone present; it spurred him on continually to hopes of a more glorious future."⁶¹ Heinrich Heine's poem compares the Middle Age ideal of love for love's sake without the hope of possession to Halevi's affection for Jerusalem.⁶²

And the hero who we sing,
Judah ben Halevy, too,
Had also his own lady love,
But one of especial sort.

She was not like the Laura
Whose eyes of mortal fire,
Kindled in the Minster
That world-renowned flame.

No Chatelaine was she,
In the bloom and crown of youth,
Presiding at the tourney,
Awarding the victor's crown.

No graduate of science gay.
No lady doctressaire,
Lecturing in the Colleges
Of the courts of Love.

She whom the Rabbi worshipped
Was a woebegone poor darling,
Desolation's very image,
And her name-Jerusalem.⁶³

⁶¹ Jacobs, "Jehuda Halevi," p. 13.

⁶² Ibid., p. 12.

⁶³ Idem.

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Halevi's poems of Zion set Jerusalem on high as the personification of Jewish history. He was able to touch the lives of the medieval Jew and put forth in words the deepest and innermost feelings of his people.⁶⁴

The greatest of all Halevi's songs to Zion is the one that is chanted in synagogues today on the Ninth of Av, the anniversary of the destruction of the Second Temple. It is Halevi's Ode to Zion. "It is a Zionide par excellence; no other poem in any literature breathes a greater love for the Holy City. Here pathos and grandeur intermingle, with glory and desolation, hope and despair."⁶⁵ It is a song bewailing the suffering of Jews over many generations and in all nations of the world. The poem opens with a greeting from all nations and from the poet who will bemoan Zion's sorrows as well as sing her joys.

Ode To Zion

Zion! wilt thou not ask if peace be with thy captives
 That seek thy peace—that are the remnant of thy flocks?

From west and east, from north and south—the greeting
 "Peace" from far and near, take thou from every side;

And greeting from the captive of desire, giving
 his tears like dew
 Of Hermon, and longing to let them fall
 upon thine hills.

To wail for thine affliction I am like the jackals;
 but when I dream

⁶⁴ Jacobs, "Jehuda Halevi," p. 13.

⁶⁵ Fein, "Yehudah Halevi," p. 3.

Of the return of thy captivity, I am a harp
for thy songs.⁶⁶

The poet to goes on to speak of how his heart yearns
for the land and how he would pour out his soul in the places
hallowed by Royalty and by Prophecy. But now slaves sit upon
the thrones of princes.

My heart to Bethel and Peniel yearneth sore,
To Machanaim and to all the places where thy
pure ones have met.

There the Presence abideth in thee; yea, there
thy Maker
Opened thy gates to face the gates of heaven.

And the Lord's glory alone was thy light;
No sun nore moon nor stars were luminants for thee.

I would choose for my soul to pour itself out
within that place
Where the spirit of God was outpoured upon
thy chosen.

Thou art the house of royalty; thou art the throne
of the Lord, and how
Do slaves sit now upon thy prince's thrones?⁶⁷

If only Halevi could wander on the land that God made
sacred by events in Jewish history or through religious
association.⁶⁸

Would I might be wandering in the places where
God was revealed unto thy seers and messengers.

⁶⁶ Salaman, Poems of Jehudah Halevi, p. 2.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

⁶⁸ Abraham Regelson, Israel's Sweetest Singer: Yehudah Halevi (New York: Shulsinger Bros., 1943), p. 22.

O who will make me wings, that I may fly afar,
And lay the ruins of my cleft heart among thy
broken cliffs!

I would fall, with my face upon thine earth
and take delight
In thy stones and be tender to thy dust.

Yea, more, when standing by my fathers' tombs
I would marvel, in Hebron, over the chosen of
thy graves.

I would pass into thy forest and thy fruitful
field, and stand
Within thy Gilead, and wonder at thy mount
beyond-

Mount Abarim, and Mount Hor, where are
the twain
Great lights-thy Luminaries, thy Teachers.

The life of souls is the air of thy land, and of
pure myrrh
The grains of thy dust, and honey from thee
comb thy rivers.

Sweet would it be unto my soul to walk naked
and barefoot
Upon the desolate ruins where thy holiest
dwellings were;

In the place of thine Ark where it is hidden
and in the place
Of thy cherubim which abode in thine
innermost recesses.⁸⁹

Halevi mourns the heroes and martyrs of Israel, who have
become prey to evil peoples. Dogs tearing at lions and ravens
tearing at the bodies of eagles make the merriment of eating
and drinking unthinkable. He paints a vivid picture of the
desecration of a people.

⁸⁹ Salaman, Poems of Jehudah Halevi, p. 5.

I will cut off and cast away the splendour of
my crown of locks, and curse the fate
That desecrated in unclean land the heads
that bore thy crown.

How shall it be sweet to me to eat and drink
while I behold
Dogs tearing at thy lions' whelps?

Or how can light of day be joyous to mine
eyes while yet
I see in ravens' beaks torn bodies of thine
eagles?⁷⁰

Alas, his tears and bitterness have finally made the
poet's cup too full. Halevi can no longer endure the sorrow
of Israel's exiled children. He begins to sing of the beauty
of Zion and the love of those who have not forgotten her.⁷¹

O cup of sorrow! gently! hold a while! already
My loins are filled, yea, and my soul, with
thy bitterness.

When I remember Oholah I drink thy fury,
And I recall Oholibah, and drain thy dregs.
Zion! perfect in beauty! love and grace thou
didst bind on to thee.

Of olden times; and still the souls of thy
companions are bound up with thee.

It is they that rejoice at thy well-being,
that are in pain
Over thy desolation, and that weep
over thy ruin-

They that, from the pit of the captive, pant
toward thee, worshipping,
Every one from his own place, toward
thy gates;

⁷⁰ Idem.

⁷¹ Regelson, Israel's Sweetest Singer, p. 23.

The flocks of my multitude, which were
exiled and scattered
From mount to hill, but have not forgotten
thy fold;

Which grasp thy skirts and strengthen
themselves
To go up and take hold of the boughs
of thy palms.⁷²

The proud poet defies Shinar (Babylon) and Pathros
(Egypt) to match Zion's greatness. Kingdoms who worship
idols will surely fall while Zion's strength will last
forever.⁷³

Shinar and Pathros-were they equal unto
thee in their greatness?
Can they compare their vanity to thy
Thummim and thy Urim?

And with whom could they compare thine
anointed Kings? and with whom
Thy prophets? and with whom thy ministrants
and thy singers

He will change, He will wholly sweep away
all the realm of idols;
Thy splendour is for ever, from age to age
thy crown.⁷⁴

In concluding the ode, Halevi commends whoever chooses
to dwell in Zion, for they will see the day the chosen
people may rejoice in Zion's redemption.⁷⁵

⁷² Salaman, Poems of Jehudah Halevi, p. 6.

⁷³ Regelson, Israel's Sweetest Singer, p. 24.

⁷⁴ Salaman, Poems of Jehudah Halevi, p. 7.

⁷⁵ Regelson, Israel's Sweetest Singer, p. 24.

Thy God hath desired thee for a dwelling place;
 and happy is the man
 Whom He chooseth and bringeth near that
 he may rest within thy courts.

Happy is he that waiteth, that cometh nigh
 and seeth the rising
 Of thy light, when on him thy dawn shall
 break-

That he may see the welfare of thy chosen,
 and rejoice
 In thy rejoicing, when though turnest back unto
 thine olden youth.⁷⁶

These last few lines of the "Ode To Zion" leave us with Halevi's renewed hope that the misfortunes of the Jewish people would pass and "...the time would come when the tortured and humiliated people would see freedom again and rejoice as its sun rises over the world, renewing Zion's glory."⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Salaman, Poems of Jehudah Halevi, p. 7.

⁷⁷ Druck, Yehudah Halevi, p. 97.

CHAPTER IV

RELIGIOUS POETRY

This chapter will follow an approach that differs from the previous chapters. I will discuss three of Halevi's religious poems and personally comment on them. Is there a common theme? What does it mean for Halevi to be a "servant of God?" As we read these poems, it will be evident that the religious poetry is permeated with the nationalistic ideas discussed in Chapter III. However, our focus will confine itself to the nature of the relationship between man and God found in the religious poetry.

A SERVANT OF GOD

Ah, would that I might be a servant of God, (1)
my Maker!
Though every friend were far from me, yet He
would draw me near.

My Maker, my Shepherd, (5)
Thou possessest my soul and my body;
Thou discernest mine aim,
Thou seest my thoughts,
My path and my couch;
And thou siftest all my ways. (10)

If Thou help me, who shall make me stumble?
If Thou restrain me, who else can set me free?

עבד אלה

קִרְתִּי עֶבֶד אֱלֹהִים עָלַי
וְנִסְתָּא קְלִידוֹר הוּא יִקְרִיבֵנִי:

אֲדִי וְרָעִי נִקְשֵׁי וְנִי הָיִיתִי
בְּנֵס לְרָעִי וְהִתְקַבֵּלֵתִי רִאשִׁיתִי
אֵתִי וְרָעִי וְקִלְדִּרְכִּי וְרִיטִי

אִם תִּשְׁתָּא עִי וְנִי אֶשְׁתָּא: קִשְׁתִּי
אִם תִּשְׁתָּא עִי קִלְדִּי וְרִיטִי:

Halevi's "Mi Yitneni" (A Servant of God), is found in the Gates of Repentance in the Afternoon Service for Yom

Kippur. The poet begins in the first two lines by expressing the fervent wish that he could be God's servant. God is addressed as a Creator who has the power to "draw near" his flock. We already get the sense of a God who is more powerful than we are, and who wants us to be connected to Him in some way. Although friends may be far away from us, God's proximity carries with it great warmth.

Halevi continues in lines 5 through 10 to describe a God who is a Creator and a leader. The God who made us has the power over our body and soul. He knows our hopes, our thoughts, our fears, and watches every step we take. This is certainly an omnipresent and omnipotent God. Lines 11 and 12 tell us that no human being has a power greater than God's. God has the ability to help or restrain, and no other being can exercise this capacity. We begin to realize the depth of Halevi's unbounded faith and love in his God.

Mine inmost parts do yearn (13)
To be in communion with Thee.
While yet my cares
Set thee afar from Thee.
And my paths incline
From the path of Thy steps.

הבשרי רחוק מלפניך
ואלם נצחי ודמיון סגליך
יש נתיבי סגליך

Lord, teach me! let me tread along Thy (19)
truth.
And gently lead me on in judgment and
condemn me not.

ה' למדני באמתך וברצוןך
ולא תענשני

We hear Halevi's longing for a closer relationship with God. How does one establish this connection to God? Lines 15 through 18 tell us what will distance us from this special

communion with God. "The path of Thy steps" appears to be a path that we do not travel. We lean away from the paths of truth that seem to be the first prerequisite to being one of God's servants. God's way is the path of truth (lines 19,20), and if we make ourselves available, God can gently help us to lead a more virtuous life and feel His presence.

If I am even in youth (23)	לעשות רצונך כתרפא	ואני בגדול
Too weak to do Thy will,	מהזנה אצל ואצפה	אחי כ"ה וקנה
How then in old age	Can I yet hope and watch?	אל נא רפא נא
On God, heal, I beseech Thee!	With Thee, O God, is the healing. (28)	אל נא רפא נא
The day old age shall root me up, and my	strength forget me.	יום חתשני
Do Thou not leave me, my God; do not	forsake me.	אל תתשני

Halevi acknowledges the overwhelming task of leading a religious life and now pleads in much more urgent language to a God who can heal those who have not lived a righteous life (lines 23-28). It is God who is the true healer, not Halevi the physician! Halevi must have felt that he was merely God's servant, endowed by God with healing powers.⁷⁸ Halevi begs God not to give up on him during the times his will to remain steadfast to God is weak.

Crushed and weak,	דכא ואסלל אשב ותרד לרועי
I sit and tremble every moment;	

⁷⁸ Salaman, Poems of Judah Halevi, p. xiv.

Naked and despoiled, I go on my vain wanderings; And I am polluted Through my manifold sins and transgressions.	ערום ומחלל אלך ברחלי תעתועי ואני מחלל מרב חטאי ופשעי
Between Thee and me - iniquity which divideth us, Holding me back from seeing Thy light with mine eyes.	ביןך ובני עון אשר יבדילני לראות באורך עיני

It is evident that Halevi sees himself as sinful and impure. He is humbly repenting before God and confessing that he is ill prepared to receive God's favor. As mentioned in previous chapters, Halevi believed that a "chosen people" must be the core and heart of humankind and be the bearers of certain ethical truths. This sense of Revelation of God to man cannot occur when "iniquity divides." The religious experience can be had by a person who hears God calling to him to lift his soul higher. God's light is there waiting to be revealed to those who are in a state of readiness and acceptance. The iniquity is holding Halevi back from seeing God's light.

Incline Thou mine heart To do the service of Thy kingdom, And my thought Make pure for knowledge of Thy Godship; And in my time of pain O stay Thou not Thine healing	נשח לך לב ליעבר עבדת מלכותך ותחשבני טהור לדעת אלהותך ובעת כאבי אל תאחר רפואתך
Answer, O my God, keep not silence, afflicting me, Redeem me now, I pray, and say unto Thy servant: I am here. 79	אלי עמי אל תחישא ותעמי אמרת עמי ואמר לַעֲבָדְךָ עָמִי

79 Ibid., pp. 90-92.

Halevi yearns to be God's servant and to do His will. Only then will Halevi be in communion with God. In the preceding poem, the poet is suffering the affliction of all Jews. He cannot reside in the Holy Land and therefore has not lived up to the obligation of his faith. Halevi only wants to be surrounded by God's presence. This will comfort him in his time of pain. The God Halevi describes is forgiving, and in healing, will reach out to those who are ready to hear His voice. This servant of God, Judah Halevi is waiting, longing to hear God say "Hineni" (I am here).

Another of these poems of longing is the famous "Ya Ana Emtsa'acha" (O Lord, Where Shall I Find You?). Halevi continues his spiritual quest for God's presence in this poem. The poet's goal is to reach a state of "sublime servitude" and to await God's Revelation. Halevi asks:

Lord, where shall I find You? (1)
Your place is lofty and secret.
And where shall I not find you?
The whole earth is full of Your glory!

יה. אנה אמצאך? מקוםך גאולה וסוד!
ואנה לא אמצאך? בדרך כלל עולם!

Although Halevi begins with a question (line 1), the following question (line 3) that he asks makes it clear that Halevi believes God's presence to be all encompassing. It is a monumental assertion of God's whereabouts. He continues:

You are found in man's innermost heart.
Yet You fixed earth's boundaries.
You are a strong tower for those who are near.
And the trust of those who are far.
You are enthroned on the cherubim,
Yet, You dwell in the heights of heaven.

הנמצא בקרבים. אסתר ארץ הקים.
השקוף לקרבים. הסבך לרחוקים.
אתה יושב קרבים. אתה שוכן שחקים.

You are praised by Your hosts.
 But even their praise is not worthy of You.
 The sphere of heaven cannot contain You;
 How much less the chambers of the Temple!

התהלל בעבדך - ואין על ראש ההללים.
 גלגל לא ישאך - אף כי חדרי אולם!

Halevi extolls God's greatness and power as shown through God's paradoxical nature. He is a presence that knows no limitations. "(God) is revealed everywhere; transcendent, and enclosed in the breast of every man; a God far off and yet near at hand; exalted above all praise, He inhabits the praise of Israel."⁸⁰

Even when You rise above Your hosts
 On a throne, high and exalted,
 You are nearer to them than their own
 Bodies and souls.
 Their mouths attest that they have no
 Maker except You.
 Who shall not fear You? All bear the yoke
 Of your kingdom. And who shall not call to You?
 It is You who give them their food.

יבדושך עליהם על כס נשא נרם.
 אמה קרוב אליהם מרוחם ומבשרם.
 פיהם נציד בהם. כי אין בליהך יוצרם.
 מי זה לא ייראך - ועל מלכותך שלם?
 או מי לא יתראך - ואמנה נותן אכלם?

God's ubiquity is wondrous. With this sense of awe comes the responsibility of the Jew to bear the "yoke of God's Kingdom." The nature of God will be revealed when those who observe moral law given by God, purify themselves spiritually.

I have sought to come near You,
 I have called to You with all my heart;
 And when I went out towards You,
 I found You coming towards me.

דרשתי קרבתך. בכל לבי קראתיך.
 ובצאתי לקראתך - וקראתי מצאתיך.
 ובסלתי גבולתך בקרש חוסיך.

⁸⁰ Shalom Spiegel, "On Medieval Poetry," in The Jews: Their History, Culture, and Religion, (New York, 1949), p. 546.

I look upon Your wondrous power with awe,
Who can say that he has not seen You?
The heavens and their legions proclaim
Your dread - without a sound.⁸¹

מי יאמר לא ראה? הן שמים וחילים
גידו סודך בלי נשמע קולם!

This is indeed a deeply moving meditation. Halevi's God is alive and everpresent. I love the image of the poet going out to meet God and finding God coming towards him. All one has to do to experience God is to look around and see God's wondrous power. Halevi celebrates a separate higher presence that is out of the realm of human logic.

The last poem to be discussed in this chapter is "Avde Z'man" (Servants of Time). It is very short poem that encapsulates Halevi's ideal of what it means to be a servant of God.

Servants of time are slaves of slaves
The servant of God alone is free.
When each man, therefore, seeks his lot,
My soul saith, "God my lot shall be."⁸²

עבד' זמן עבד' עבדים הם
עבד אדני וזו לא לבר השמי
על כן בקבש נל' צאש חלקו
חלקי אדני אסרה נפשי:

Halevi had reached a time in his life where he tired of the salon life as well as seeking favor of patrons. He searched for more meaning and began to spend more time in religious devotion. This poem is reminiscent of a passage in The Kuzari, in which the Rabbi talks to the King of the Khazars. He says that even if he could obtain his freedom from servitude, it

⁸¹ T. Carmi, The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse (England: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 338.

⁸² Translation by Rabbi Jerome Malino.

would not profit him. "I would rather seek the service of the One whose favor is obtained with the smallest effort, yet it profits in this world and the next."⁸³ This is the more mature poet, who believes that servitude of God is not slavery, but a path to freedom. He willfully embraces his lot.

The three poems discussed in this chapter are all expressions of Halevi's loving devotion to God. The poet is dedicated to serving God, discovering God's presence, and to taking on the responsibility of his faith. The Jews, as a God-bearing people of history, must seek the religious experience of achieving living contact with God. It is the goal of humankind to raise oneself to a higher level by reaching out to a being higher than ourselves. According to Halevi, it is only in this search that we can be totally free.

⁸³ David DeSola, "The Kuzari: Yehuda Halevi's Defense of his Faith," Yehuda Halevi: Sweet Swinger of Zion, (New York: Zionist Organization of America, 1941), p. 27.

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