

The Religious and Secular Poetry of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi

Part #3 - The Journey To Israel

Epigram by Halevi, The Song of the Distant Dove, pg 17-18

The slaves of time are slaves of slaves
the slave of Gd alone is free
and so when others seek their lot
I say, "no lot but Gd for me"

The Kuzari 1:13, 4:1-16 [On the Limits of Philosophy]

1:13. The Rabbi: That which you express is religion based on speculation and system, the research of thought, but open to many doubts. Now ask the philosophers, and you will find that they do not agree on one action or one principle, since some doctrines can be established by arguments, which are only partially satisfactory, and still much less capable of being proved.

4:1. **THE Rabbi:** ELŌHIM is a term signifying the ruler, or governor of the world...A more exact and more lofty name is to be found in the form known as the **Tetragrammaton**. This is a proper noun, which can only be indicated by attributes, but has no location, and was formerly unknown. If He was commonly styled 'Elōhim,' the Tetragrammaton was used as special name.

2. **Al Khazari:** How can I individualise a being, if I am not able to point to it, and can only prove its existence by its actions?

3. **The Rabbi:** It can be designated by prophetic or visionary means. Demonstration can lead astray. Demonstration was the mother of heresy and destructive ideas....Those who go to the utmost length are the philosophers, and the ways of their arguments led them to teach of a Supreme Being which neither benefits nor injures, and knows nothing of our prayers, offerings, obedience, or disobedience, and that the world is as eternal as He himself. None of them applies a distinct proper name to God, except he who hears His address, command, or prohibition, approval for obedience, and reproof for disobedience. He bestows on Him some name as a designation for Him who spoke to him, and he is convinced that He is the Creator of the world from nought.

16. **Al Khazari:** Now I understand the difference between Elōhim and Adonāi, and I see how far the God of Abraham is different from that of Aristotle. Man yearns for Adonāi as a matter of love, taste, and conviction; while attachment to Elōhim is the result of speculation. A feeling of the former kind invites its votaries to give their life for His sake, and to prefer death to His absence. Speculation, however, makes veneration only a necessity as long as it entails no harm, but bears no pain for its sake. I would, therefore, excuse Aristotle for thinking lightly about the observation of the law, since he doubts whether God has any cognizance of it.

Harry Wolfson - "Maimonides and Halevi: A study in typical jewish attitudes towards Greek philosophy in the middle ages"

"To the philosopher, God is merely a logical necessity, a final link, arbitrarily chosen to terminate the otherwise endless chain of potentiality and actuality

The Kuzari 2:22-25

"אמר הכוזרי: אם כן עובר אתה על מצוה המחייבת לפי תורתך אם אינך עולה אל המקום ההוא! (=ארץ ישראל)... אמר החבר: אכן, מצאת מקום חרפתי, מלך כוזר! כי אמנם הטא זה הוא אשר בגללו לא נתקיים הייעוד אשר יעד הא-לוה לבית השני... אף אנו, אילו היינו מוכנים להתקרב אל א-לוהי אבותינו בלבב שלם, כי אז היה הוא ית' מושיענו כאשר הושיע את אבותינו במצרים" (ב', כג-כד).

23. Al Khazari: If this be so, thou fallest short of the duty laid down in your law, by not endeavouring to reach that place, and making it your abode in life and death, although thou sayest: 'Have mercy on Zion, for it is the house of our life,' and believest that the Shekhinah will return there....

24. The Rabbi: This is a severe reproach, O king of the Khazars. It is the sin which kept the divine promise with regard to the second Temple, viz.: Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion' (Zech. ii. 10), from being fulfilled. Divine Providence was ready to restore everything as it had been at first, if they had all willingly consented to return. But only a part was ready to do so, while the majority and the aristocracy remained in Babylon, preferring dependence and slavery, and unwilling to leave their houses and their affairs.

The Kuzari - Conclusion

22. The Rabbi was then concerned to leave the land of the Khazari and to betake himself to Jerusalem. The king was loth to let him go, and spoke to him in this sense as follows: What can be sought in Palestine nowadays, since the divine reflex is absent from it, while, with a pure mind and desire, one can approach God in any place. Why will thou run into danger. on land and water and among various peoples?

23. The Rabbi answered: The visible Shekhināh has, indeed, disappeared, because it does not reveal itself except to a prophet or a favoured community, and in a distinguished place. This is what we look for in the passage: 'Let our eyes behold when Thou returnest to Zion.' As regards the invisible and spiritual Shekhināh, it is with every born Israelite of virtuous life, pure heart, and upright mind before the Lord of Israel. Palestine is especially distinguished by the Lord of Israel, and no function can be perfect except there. Many of the Israelite laws do not concern those who do not live there; heart and soul are only perfectly pure and immaculate in the place which is believed to be specially selected by God. If this is true in a figurative sense, how much more true in reality, as we have shown Thus the longing for it is awakened with disinterested motives, **especially for him who wishes to live there, and to atone for past transgressions, since there is no opportunity of bringing the sacrifices ordained by God for intentional and unintentional sins.** He is supported by the saying of the Sages: 'Exile atones for sins,' especially if his exile brings him into the place of God's choice. ...**In my opinion this is better than to seek the dangers of war in order to gain fame and spoil by courage and bravery. This kind of danger is even inferior to that of those who march into war for hire.**

24. Al Khazari: I thought that thou did love freedom, but now I see thee finding new religious duties which thou will be obliged to fulfil in Palestine, which are, however, in abeyance here.

25. The Rabbi: I only seek freedom from the service of those numerous people whose favour I do not care for, and sha never obtain, though I worked for it all my life. Even if I could obtain it, it would not profit me--I mean serving men and courting their favour. I would rather seek the service of the One whose favour is obtained with the smallest effort, yet it profits in this world and the next. This is the favour of God, His service spells freedom, and humility before Him is true honour....

28. Al Khazari: If this be so, it would be a sin to hinder thee. It is, on the contrary, a merit to assist thee. May God grant thee His help, and be your protector and friend. May He favour thee in His mercy.

1

נפשי לבית אל נכספה גם בלחה,
 גם בחלומות לחזוהו עלתה.
 עלתה ולא מצאה ארוכה, כי חלום
 לא יחלים נפש בקיץ חלחה.
 חלחה ביום לא חלחה פנים אשר
 לולי יקרים ותדרם בלחה.
 בלחה להתחמש, ונגעה לעלות,
 כי לא לחזו חלחה יום חלחה.
 חלחה ונדלתי מעין פחחה, ועוד
 עינה אלי מים עמוקים חלחה.
 חלחה עלי יחד ואשר אסרה
 כל תשוב חכמה, ואלה אלתה.

My soul is yearning, longing for the House of God,
 in dreams she tries to rise to see Him—
 rises, finds no comfort. How can dreams
 bring healing to a soul in sorrow?—
 in sorrow since the day she first was barred
 from visiting the Presence
 without Whose splendor she would fade away.
 She fades away to be renewed,
 and struggles upward—
 not for no purpose was she exiled.
 Exiled, she opened a fountain's door,
 lifts her eye to deeper waters;
 lifts herself onto a solid perch, makes solemn vows
 never to abandon wisdom,
 binds herself with solemn oaths.

2

יצאה לקדמוך כלה לך בלחה,
 מיום אשר לא חלחה קדשך חלחה.
 השחוממה מדי עלחה להר קדש
 כי ראחה זרים עלו ולא עלחה.
 ותעמד רחוק משחונה נכח
 היקלך מפל מקום אשר חלחה.
 דברי החנחה שלחה לך מנחה;
 לבח ועיניה מול כסאך חלחה.
 נשקף ונאוויה, ושמע לשועתה,
 קוראה במר לבח ונפשה אשר חלחה.

4

Your bride is coming out to meet You, longing,
 heartsick since the day she first was barred
 from visiting Your sanctuary.
 Each time of pilgrimage, she gazes, shamefaced,
 at the strangers who have made the journey,
 while she has not.
 She stands far off
 in all the places of her exile,
 bowing toward Your Holy Temple,
 sending prayers instead of sacrifices,
 lifts her heart and eyes toward Your throne.
 Look down at her from heaven, hear the cry
 she cries with bitter heart and yearning soul.

3

אצעק בלב נמס ופיו ברבים
 לאל, חלחה בכל מנחם,
 יום חופשי משוש תקדים לחזוהו,
 גם חובלים לא ימצאו ימים.
 איך לא אחי בן, ואני על גב אחי
 תלוי בבין מים ובין שמים?
 אחוז ואני, ונקל זאת ערי
 אחוז בתוכי, ירושלים.

27

I shout to God
 when my heart turns to slush,
 when my knees give way,
 when my gut is tight with fear,
 when oarsmen gape,
 when rope-men lose their grip.
 How else could I be?
 Just look at me—
 suspended—
 on a boat, between the wave and water,
 I whirl and wander like a drunk.
 But what matter?
 In a while
 I will whirl
 more drunk than now,
 among your streets,
 Jerusalem.

4

הַתְּרַדְּךָ וְעֵרֹת אַחַר חַמְשִׁים
 וְנִמְיָד לְהִתְעוֹפֵף חַמְשִׁים?
 וְתִבְרַח מֵעֲבֹדַת הָאֱלֹהִים
 וְתִקְסֵף אֶל עֲבֹדַת הָאָנָשִׁים?
 וְתִרְשֵׁ אֶת פְּנֵי רַבִּים, וְהַפֵּשׁ
 פְּנֵי אֶחָד לְכָל חֲפֶז דְּרוּשִׁים?
 וְתִעֲצַל לְהִצְטַד לְכָרְכָךְ,
 וְתִמְכֹר חֶלְקֶךָ בְּגוֹי עֲרָשִׁים?
 הֲלֹא אִמְרָתְךָ לְךָ עוֹד וּנְפִשְׁךָ "הוֹן"
 וְתִאֲנַתְּהָ חֲבִיבֵךְ לְחַדְשִׁים?
 וְשָׂה מֵעַל עֲצָתָהּ אֶל עֲצַת אֵל,
 וְסוּר מֵעַל חַמְשַׁת הַרְגָּשִׁים,
 וְהִתְרַצָּה לְיוֹצְרֶךָ בְּיָמֶיךָ
 יְמוֹתֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר אֵצִים וְנִשְׁמִים.
 וְאַל תִּדְרֹשׁ בְּלֵב וּלֵב רְצוֹנֹה,
 וְאַל תִּלְדָּד לְךָ לְקִרְאֹת נְחֻשִׁים.
 הִנֵּה לְעִשׂוֹת רְצוֹנֹה עוֹן כְּנֹמֵר,
 וְקַל כְּצִבִי, וְגִבּוֹר כְּלִישִׁים.
 וְאַל יִמוּט בְּלֵב יָמִים לְבָבְךָ,
 וְתִרְיָם תִּתְחַזֵּק מִשִׁים וּמְשִׁים,
 וּמְלָחִים יְדִיָּהֶם כְּמִלְחִים,
 וְחֲכָמֵי הַחֲרָשִׁים מִחֲרִישִׁים--
 שְׂמֵחִים הוֹלְכִים נֹכַח פְּנֵיהֶם,
 וְשֹׁבִים אֶל אַחֲרֵיהֶם וּבֹשִׁים--
 וְאוֹקֵינֹס לְפָנֶיךָ לְמָנוֹס,
 וְאֵין מִבְּרַח לְךָ כִּי אִם יְקוּשִׁים,
 וְיִנּוּטוּ וְיִנּוּטוּ קָלְעִים,
 וְיִנּוּעוּ וְיִנּוּעוּ קָרְשִׁים,
 וְיִד רֹיחַ מִצְחָקָת בְּמִים
 כְּנוֹשְׂאֵי הַעֲמָרִים בְּרִישִׁים,
 וּפְעַם תִּעֲשֶׂה מִתָּהּ גְּרִנוֹת,
 וּפְעַם תִּעֲשֶׂה מִתָּהּ גְּרִישִׁים--
 בְּעֵת הַתְּגַבְּרָם דָּמוֹ אֲרִיּוֹת,
 וְעֵת הַחֲלָשׁם דָּמוֹ נְחֻשִׁים--

Still chasing fun at fifty, like a boy!—
 and yet your time could run out any day.
 You flee God's service,
 have no better aspiration
 than to be a slave to men.
 You seek the favor of the many, turn away
 from One who has it in Him
 to answer every man's desire,
 if they would only ask.
 You won't be bothered gathering provisions for your journey,
 but lightly trade the banquet of eternity
 for lentil stew.
 When will your appetite say, "Enough"?
 When will your lust
 stop growing back her maidenhead every month?
 Turn from her advice to God's,
 abandon those five senses.
 Make peace with your Creator
 while your remaining days are speeding by.
 Do not expect halfhearted deeds will please Him,
 or go to serpent-oracles to learn your fate.
 To do His will, be tiger-fierce, gazelle-fleet, lion-mighty.
 And do not lose heart in the heart of the sea,
 when mountains seem to be sliding, shifting,
 when sailors' hands are limp as rags
 and skillful seamen silent, helpless
 (they were jaunty sailing forward;
 cross now, thrust backward).
 You've nowhere but the ocean to escape to,
 the trap of doom your only refuge.
 The sails are tilting, slipping,
 boards shift and tremble.
 The wind toys with the water
 like harvesters bringing sheaves to threshing,
 pats the water flat as a threshing floor,
 then heaps it up like mounds of grain.
 The waves surge up like lions leaping,
 then recede in foam that coils like serpents.

ציון קלא תשאלי לשלום אסיריך
 וירשי שלומך, והם יזר עברתיך
 מים ונזרה ומצפון וזימן שלום
 רחוק וקרוב שאי מפל עברתיך,
 ושלום אסיר תאמר נתון דמעי פשל
 מרמז, ונכסף לרדמם על הרריתך.
 לכתוב ענותך אני חיים ועת אחים
 שבת שבתך, אני כבוד לשירתיך.
 לבי לבת אל ולפניאל מאר ידמות
 ולמתנים וכל פנעי שדורתיך.
 עם תשכינה שבתה לך, והיוצרתך
 פתח לבמל שערי שחק שעריך,
 וקבור ארזי לבד תיה מאורה, ואין
 שמש וסחר וכוכבים מאוריך.
 אבחר לנפשי להשתפך במקום אשר
 רוח אלהים שפורה על בודיך.
 את בית מלכות, ואת פסא ארזי, ואם
 ישבו עבדים עלי כסאות גבוריך.
 מי יחגי פשוטת במקומות אשר
 נגלו אלהים לחזיון ועיריך
 מי תעשה לי כתובים ואודיק נדל,
 איך לבחרי לבבי בין פתריך.
 אפל לאפי עלי ארצת, וארצה אבי-
 ניד מאר, ואחזן את עפרתיך,
 אף פי בקעדי עלי קברות אבותי, ואש-
 חמם בחבריו עלי מבחר קברתיך.
 אעבר ביערך וברמלה, ואעמד מגל-
 ערד ואשתתקמה אל הר עבריך--

Jerusalem! Have you no greeting
 for your captive hearts, your last remaining flocks,
 who send you messages of love?
 Here are greetings for you from west and east,
 from north and south, from near and far, from every side—
 greetings also from a certain man,
 a captive of your love,
 who pours his tears like dew on Mount Hermon,
 and longs to shed them on your slopes.
 My voice is like a jackal's when I mourn your suffering,
 but when I dream of how your exiles will return,
 I turn into a lyre.
 My heart is aching for Beth-el, Peniel, Mahanayim,
 every place where saints met messengers from God;
 where the *Shekhina* is your neighbor;
 where your Maker made your gates
 facing the gates of heaven;
 where the Glory of the Lord serves you for light,
 not merely luminescent bodies—
 sun and moon and stars.
 You are the house of kings, the throne of David's God,
 though slaves are sitting on your nobles' thrones.
 I wish my soul could overflow
 where once the holy spirit poured out
 over your elect. I wish that I could wander
 where the Lord appeared to visionaries, prophets;
 wish that I had wings
 to fly away to you—so far!—
 and place the pieces of my broken heart
 among your jagged mountains,
 throw my face down to your ground,
 fondle your gravel and caress your soil.
 Even more would I delight
 to stand beside the tombs
 of ancestors and patriarchs,
 and gaze at your choice graves;
 to cross your fields and forests,
 stand at Gilead, gaze at Avarim—

דר העברים ודר החר אשר שם שני
 אורים גדלים באירוח ומוריד.
 הני נשמות אורי ארצך ומקר-דור
 אבקת עפרך, נפש ארץ חכמה.
 נעם לנפשי חלוד ערם וחסה עלי
 חרבות שקמה אשר ננו ובמקום כר-
 בוך אשר שקנו חררי חכמה.
 אנו ואשליך פאר חרי ואקב וכן
 חלל פארץ שמאח את חכמה.
 אך יערב לי אכל ושמות בעת חכמה
 כי יסובו חקלים את כפיריך.
 אז אוד פאר ים וזי חזק לעני פעור
 ארצה פפי עורבים פמרי נשיריך.
 כוס חכמה לאטו חרפי מעשו פי כפר
 מלאו כסלי נפשי כמורחך.
 עת אפרח אלה אשמה חכמה ואת-
 פר אהליבה ואמצה את שקמך.
 ציון פקלית יפיו אהבה וחו חקשר
 מאן וקד נקשרו נמשות חכמה.
 הם השמות לשלוחו חכמים
 על שומחתו חכמים על שקמך.
 מפור שבי שאפים חכמה ומשחתו
 איש מקובו עלי נכח שקמך
 עררי חכמה אשר עלו ורפוח
 מחר לנפשה ולא שקחו חכמה.
 תחזיקים בשלילך ומחאמצי
 לעלות ולאח כנספי חכמה.

Hor and Avarim—where lie the two luminaries,
 men who brought you light and taught you wisdom.
 Your air—the breath of life!
 Flowing myrrh, the dust that rises from your soil
 Your rivers, molten honeycomb!
 What joy my soul would have if I could walk
 naked, barefoot, on the ruins,
 on the rubble that your Temple has become,
 where once your covenant-tabernacle was,
 now hidden,
 site of your two cherubim
 that once resided in your inner chamber.
 I'd shear and throw away my splendid locks,
 and curse the fate that has defiled your Nazirites
 in an unclean land.
 What pleasure can I get from food and drink
 when I have to see the dogs dragging
 your lions with their teeth?
 How can my eyes enjoy the daylight
 when I see your eagle's corpses
 in the mouths of crows?
 Gently, cup of sorrow! Let me be!
 Long enough have my guts been filled with gall.
 To contemplate the fate of Ohola
 is to gulp your poisoned brew;
 to think of Oholiva's fate—
 to suck the dregs.
 Jerusalem! O perfect beauty!
 You bind your hair in love and grace
 as your true friends have bound their souls to you—
 your friends, whose joy is your tranquility,
 who ache at your destruction, weep for your disasters,
 yearn for you from their captivity,
 bow, wherever they may be, toward your gates—
 your flocks, your exiled throngs,
 scattered from hill to hill,
 who still recall your folds,
 who hold onto your hem,
 who stretch themselves to rise
 and grasp the branches of your palms.

שָׁעַר וּפְתוּחַי הַיַּעֲרִיבִיךָ בַּיַּדְּכֶם וְאִם
 נִבְלַם יָדְכֶם לְחַפּוֹד וְאִתְּרִיךָ
 אֶל-כִּי יִדְכֶם מִשְׁחִיחֶיךָ וְאֶל-כִּי נָבִי-
 אֶרְדָּךְ וְאֶל-כִּי לִינֶיךָ וְשִׁיחֶיךָ
 וְשָׁעַר וּפְתוּחַי בְּלִיל פֶּל-מִמְלָכוֹת הַמְּאֻלָּלִי
 תִּסְכַּךְ לְעוֹלָם לְדוֹר וְדוֹר תִּרְרִיךָ
 אֶתְּךָ לְמִלְשָׁב אֱלֹהִיךָ, וְאִשְׁרֵי אֱנוֹשׁ
 יִבְחַר יָקָרֵב וְיִשְׁכֵּן בְּהַמְצָרֶיךָ
 אִשְׁרֵי מַחְסֶפֶת וְיִנְעַץ וְיִרְאֶה עֲלוֹת
 אֶתְּךָ, וְיִבְקָעֵנּוּ עֲלֵי שְׁחֵרְרֶךָ
 לְרֵאוֹת בַּמִּשְׁבֵּת מַחְוִירֶיךָ וְלִקְעוֹל פֶּשְׁעֶי-
 תִּתְּנֶךָ בְּשִׁיחֶיךָ אֱלֵי קִרְבַּת וּמְעוֹרֶיךָ.

Babylon and Egypt at their height—
 what were they to you?
 How could their superstitions be a match
 for the Urin and Turmin that were yours alone?
 Did they have God-anointed kings,
 or prophets, Levites singing in their temples?
 The crown of all the ungodly kingdoms
 is doomed to tarnish and to pass away;
 your greatness will endure, your crown is everlasting.
 God chose to dwell in you,
 and happy is the man He chooses to bring near
 to make his home within your courts;
 who waits and lives to see your rising sun,
 the new dawn breaking over you;
 who lives to see your chosen ones in bliss,
 rejoicing in your joy,
 to see you once again as once you were
 when you were young.

Letter From
 Abū Ḥalīm
 To Halevi

6

As for the news here: the judge took all the poems and made them into a *ḥuwān*, with headings such as, "This is the poem that Master Judah recited about a pool and a fountain" and "This is what he said in reply"; "This is what Master Judah (may his Rock protect him) recited about chickens" and "This is his reply"; and what he said about this, that, and the other person, and "What he said in a dream."²⁸ People who saw them [the poems] and hadn't seen that sort of thing were saying, "How can a man who has declared himself a pilgrim be speaking such nonsense?"—especially when he saw what he saw. I was told these things by several witnesses. One incident was only reported by a single person of the judge's circle, according to whom he [Ibn al-'Armanān] said, "One of the top men of the community offered Halevi bread in his house, and he refused to eat it; but he has been with us and does not stop writing panegyrics about us." This caused a great uproar among people who were angered that this had happened to him. I swear, I gave everyone the answer that he deserved, though I am really displeased with the one in the circle of the judge who was the cause of all this because he caused people embarrassment.

In addition, [he was criticized for] the phrase "thorn-bush cuttings" in his poem with the first line "Unhappy Are My Thoughts This Hanukkah." . . . The only thing that led me to mention this, by God, is pure friendship for you, not anger at anyone else, and my caring for your dignity (may it ever be great!). Do not task me with thoughtlessness or frivolity. This is not my nature. I have only one face and I do not conceal a thing, either in religious or worldly affairs.