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## Walking Towards the Herald of Good Tidings

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*Published in:*  
Herald of Good Tidings

Published: 23/09/2021

*Document Version*  
Final published version

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*Please cite the original version:*

Lindqvist, P. (2021). Walking Towards the Herald of Good Tidings: An Epilogue in the Footsteps of Judah Halevi. In P. Lindqvist, & L. Valve (Eds.), *Herald of Good Tidings: Essays on the Bible, Prophecy, and the Hope of Israel in Honour of Antti Laato* (pp. 367-388). (Hebrew Bible Monographs; Vol. 97). Sheffield phoenix press.  
<https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe202201148502>

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WALKING TOWARDS THE HERALD  
OF GOOD TIDINGS:  
AN EPILOGUE IN THE FOOTSTEPS  
OF JUDAH HALEVI

Pekka Lindqvist

*'Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings,  
lift up your voice with strength,  
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,  
lift it up, do not fear;  
say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"'*  
(Isa. 40.9; NRSV)

*'O lovely hill, world's joy, the Great King's home!  
My heart is yearning for you from the wide world's western edge'.<sup>1</sup>*  
(Judah Halevi)

1. *Introduction*

Pilgrimage is walking towards the presence of the transcendent—in the present context we may call it *shekhinah*.<sup>2</sup> As we approach the conclusion of the present volume, we may allow ourselves to compare the quest of

1. Translation: R.P. Scheindlin, *The Song of the Distant Dove: Judah Halevi's Pilgrimage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 166-67.

2. Linda Kay Davidson and David M. Gitlitz (*Pilgrimage from the Ganges to Graceland: An Encyclopedia* [Santa Barbara, CA: ABC CLIO, 2002], p. xvii) call pilgrimage 'a journey to a special place, in which both the journey and the destination have spiritual significance for the journeyer. A pilgrimage is by nature a quest, a journey in search of experience that will effect the kind of change that will make a difference to the individual's life or spirit'. For other definitions on pilgrimage, see, e.g., Simon Coleman and John Eade (eds.), *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (London: Routledge, 2004).

a biblical scholar to that of a pilgrim. A biblical scholar in his quest for the original, the earlier and the deeper understanding, wanders through centuries and millennia, and not seldom towards the biblical lands and Zion.

The *herald of good tidings* (מבשרת ירושלים, מבשרת ציון) of Isa. 40.9 is Zion.<sup>3</sup> The *good tidings* is the message of presence of the Lord, ‘Behold—your God’ (הנה אלהיכם).<sup>4</sup> In its Isaianic context it conveys a message of redemption and hope, and thus comfort for the exiled people, but as to its content it is first and foremost a message of the *presence of the Lord in Zion*. This is our starting point.

Prophetic visions and hopes of return to and restoration of Zion, the dwelling of Lord’s Presence, glow in the hearts of the Israelites and those who see themselves linked to Israel by spiritual bonds, and have been written down thousands of times by the hands of the authors of post-biblical centuries. Christian pilgrimage to the holy sites starts early, in the fourth century, and over the course of centuries becomes a supreme form of piety, available for the less-ascetic pious too. Pilgrims’ reports animate enthusiasm for the city of God in Europe.<sup>5</sup> The Jewish community had its pilgrims too. The best-known itinerary comes from Benjamin of Tudela, a traveller over all Middle East in the twelfth century.<sup>6</sup> These travelogues are, however, not necessarily the peak of the love story.

The epoqe of Medieval Spanish Hebrew poetry<sup>7</sup> produced—few would disagree—the most beautiful expressions of the yearning for Zion.

3. This we learn from Hugh Williamson’s essay at the beginning of the present volume. Williamson shows that the good news issue *from*—and not *to*—Zion.

4. NRSV: ‘Here is your God’.

5. A classic is Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (Columbia Classics in Religion; New York: Columbia University Press, 1978). For a more recent discussion, Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred: Debate on Christian Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005); Larissa Juliet Taylor (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Medieval Pilgrimage* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2009). A nice-to-know detail with a link to the honoree of the present volume: During the week when the volume had reached its final stage on the editors’ desks, we received an announcement that a fresh (and first) Finnish translation of *Itinerarium Egeriae*, Egeria’s story of her pilgrimage to the Holy Land, had been published, by our honoree’s wife, Anni Maria Laato, through the Patristic Society of Finland.

6. For his travelogue, see, e.g., Rolf P. Schmitz, *Benjamin von Tudela: Buch der Reisen (Sefar Ha-Massa’ot) in Deutsche übertragen von Rolf P. Schmitz* (Judentum und Umwelt, 22; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1988).

7. On this, see, e.g., T. Carmi, *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), pp. 24-33.

The period became a golden age of the *zionides*, hymns to Zion, in the spirit of the wording found in the Psalms, Prophets and words of promise included in the Pentateuch and linked to a people on its way towards the place chosen by the Lord in which his name would dwell. Among a group of poets longing for Zion, including such as Ibn Gabirol, Ibn Ezra, and al-Ḥarizi, the most prominent place is without doubt taken by Judah Halevi, who pours out his affection and longing for Zion in poetic form, and whose works combine both word and deed. Halevi's poetic oeuvre consists of around one thousand poems—approximately eight hundred of which are extant—and among these his *zionides* may be the best known to a general audience. He sings about, and to, Zion, and wanders towards it.

In its introduction, the two volume set *Pilgrimage from the Ganges to Graceland: An Encyclopedia* calls Jerusalem—among all the destinations for pilgrimage—as one of those places where the divine was once present among humankind.<sup>8</sup> Although the reference here is apparently closer to the Christian interpretation of the Divine presence, the same holds true too when the focus moves to the Jewish understanding: Lord as present in Zion, in the Temple, through his name, through *Shekhinah*. Moreover, who would not desire to seek where the Lord was present too, to be closer to it, and perhaps experience it in an intimate way not possible anywhere else? For a more thorough explanation of these both understandings, one could turn to a biblical scholar who has lingered at length in this mystery.

One of Antti Laato's most recent contributions in hard cover is the edited volume 'Understanding the Spiritual meaning of Jerusalem in three Abrahamic Religions'.<sup>9</sup> The introductory essay of the volume is a substantial overview covering nearly 40 pages and entitled 'Understanding the Spiritual Meaning of Jerusalem—A historical and Theological Review'.<sup>10</sup> The author mourns over the fact that he is not

8. Davidson and Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage*, p. xvii.

9. A. Laato (ed.), *Understanding the Spiritual Meaning of Jerusalem in Three Abrahamic Religions* (STCA, 6; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2019).

10. A. Laato, 'Understanding the Spiritual Meaning of Jerusalem: A Historical and Theological Overview', in Laato (ed.), *Understanding*, pp. 3-40. His earlier contributions focusing especially on the Zion theology, see the monograph *The Origin of the Israelite Zion Theology* (LHBOTS, 661; London: Bloomsbury T. & T. Clark, 2018), and an article 'Understanding Zion Theology in the Book of Isaiah', in G. Andersson, T. Wasserman and D. Willgren (eds.), *Studies in Isaiah: History, Theology, and Reception* (LHBOTS, 654; London: Bloomsbury T. & T. Clark, 2017), pp. 22-46.

able to open all the post-biblical perspectives on Jerusalem. One of entrances left unopened is that of medieval Judaism. Even if I am but a novice in the study of this era, not to mention poetry, I wish to lead the reader in an exploration of some passages in Halevi's *zionides*. In these, the pilgrim-poet speaks to his beloved Zion, or of it, and looks towards it. How does he speak of Zion? He is longing for the presence of God dwelling on that hilltop. Halevi fills his poems with biblical images, especially from the first *zionides*, the Psalms, and prophetic words, which once, in their original context, expressed hopeful visions. Although his Zion is for the time being desolate abandoned and distant—an important theme which recurs in Halevi's poems—there is the hope of being privileged to experience the Presence. But this can be experienced only in Zion. While Halevi's Zion is biblical, the style merges the biblical poetry into the forms and finesse of Arabic love poetry. Judah Halevi writes about Zion while in Spain, while on the seas, and while on the threshold of Zion, during his eight to nine months' stay in Egypt. Even when the anxiety of moving increases, one cannot detect even a slightest sign of hesitation on his part, and in spite of pining for his daughter, and his beloved grandson, his namesake Judah, whom he left behind, he nonetheless eventually concludes that nothing can be higher than the burning wish of a Jew to be in Zion.

I take the sweetness of Thy name into my mouth for sustenance;  
 And I have no care for worldly goods,  
 Nor for treasure nor for aught that may perish—  
 Even so far that I can forsake her that went forth from my loins  
 Sister of my soul—and she mine only one—  
 And I can forget her son, though it pierce my heart,  
 And I have nothing left but his memory for a symbol—  
 Fruit of my loins, child of my delight—  
 Ah! How should Jehudah forget Jehudah?  
*But all this is a light thing when set against Thy love,  
 Since I may enter Thy gates with thanksgiving,  
 And sojourn there, and count my heart  
 A burnt offering bound upon Thine altar;  
 And may make my grave in thy land,  
 So that it be there a witness for me.*<sup>11</sup>

11. Heinrich Brody (ed.), *Selected Poems of Jehudah Halevi* (trans. Nina Salaman; Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publications Society, 1924), pp. 22-23. This is approximately the latter half of the poem. For another translation, see Scheindlin, *Distant Dove*, p. 25.

## 2. *The Necessity of Leaving for Zion*

In 1140 Judah Halevi sets out on his pilgrimage towards the Holy Land, landing in Alexandria in September just before the High Holidays of Tishri. Prior to this he has, after a work of twenty years, finished his major work, a philosophical-theological, '*Kitab al-Khazari: Book of Argument and Proof in Defense of the Despised Faith*', better known as *Kuzari*.

In the fifth essay of *Kuzari* (5.22), the king of Khazars, having learned earlier (2.24) of *ḥaver*'s thoughts about seeking Zion himself, questions—or rather, Halevi lets him to question—the whole idea of travelling:

He said to him, 'What do you seek today in Jerusalem and the Land of Canaan—the Divine Presence is gone from these places! Closeness to God can be achieved in any place, with good heart and strong desire. Why, then, should you place yourself in danger from deserts, oceans and various hostile peoples?'<sup>12</sup>

The rabbi's answer culminates in an explanation of Ps. 102.4-5, 'For your servants hold its stones dear, and have pity on its dust...' This is the kind of love, rabbi/Halevi explains, God asks of his people. It is a prerequisite for rebuilding the city. The restoration is combined with the advent of the Messiah, who will come only when the Jewish people love the stones and dust of the Holy Land sufficiently.<sup>13</sup> The rabbi's answer in the dialogue is highly autobiographical, as we can see in Halevi's love for this particular Psalm. To put one's face in the dust and against the stones of Jerusalem recurs in poetic words throughout his poems.

We will now examine a handful of poems or excerpts of poems in which Judah Halevi articulates his longing to be in the dwelling of the *Shekhinah*, a cry so deep that that, in his imagination, he is already repeatedly embracing the stones and dust of Jerusalem. It is not possible, however, to move on from a general description of Halevi's longing for Zion to his poems, without quoting from what is perhaps the most

12. N. Daniel Korobkin (trans.), *Rabbi Yehuda Halevi: The Kuzari, In Defense of the Despised Faith* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998).

13. See Yahalom, *Poetry and Pilgrimage*, p. 129; Daniel J. Lasker, 'Judah Halevi on Eschatology and Messianism', in Benjamin Hary and Haggai Ben-Shammai (eds.), *Esoteric and Exoteric Aspects in Judeo-Arabic Culture* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2006), pp. 85-106 (esp. 93-102). Lasker points out, referring to *Kuzari* 2:23, that in leaving his land of birth for an uncertain future, Judah Halevi was emulating the patriarchs (p. 94).

beautiful and touching expression of his thirst echoing out from the distant shores in the Western end of the Mediterranean, *My Heart is in the East*,<sup>14</sup> and thus we begin there.

### 3. *Longing from a Distant Shore*

My heart in the East, and I in the West,  
 as far in the West as west can be!  
 How can I enjoy my food?  
 What flavor can it have for me?  
 How can I fulfill my vows  
 or do the things I've sworn to do,  
 while Zion is in Christian hands<sup>15</sup>  
 and I am trapped in Arab lands?  
 Easily I could leave behind  
 this Spain and all her luxuries!  
 —As easy to leave as dear the sight  
 of the Temple's rubble would be to me.<sup>16</sup>

In this poem, the best known, perhaps seconded only by the extensive *Ode to Zion* ('Zion, will you not ask for the welfare...'), several key aspects are collected in a few powerful lines. All of them are further repeated in the rest of his Zion-poetry: the feeling of not being where one should be, the reality of the present condition of Zion—which is Crusader Jerusalem—and the deep anxiousness over that, as well as his current privileged conditions in Spain, the luxuries of being a celebrity among his flocks compared to the hardships waiting ahead. The vow to which he refers has been traditionally interpreted as a pledge to leave Spain for Zion,<sup>17</sup> something his heart keeps on burning for. Scheindlin, however, questions the reference to a real vow: Neither Jerusalem in

14. For translations I use those of Nina Salaman (in Brody [ed.], *Selected Poems*), R.P. Scheindlin (in *Distant Dove*) and J. Yahalom (in *Poetry and Pilgrimage*). Each of these also include the Hebrew text. T. Carmi (*Hebrew Verse*) is also consulted in cases where the poem at hand is included. Esthetically I often find Scheindlin's translations superior, despite the fact that every now and then he incorporates rather strong interpretations in his translations.

15. בחבל אדום, 'in the domain of Edom'.

16. Translation by Scheindlin (*Song of a Distant Dove*, p. 169; including the Hebrew text). Other translations include Brody (ed.), *Selected Poems*, p. 2; Carmi, *Hebrew Verse*, p. 347.

17. E.g. Carmi, *Hebrew Verse*, p. 347.

Christian hands nor the Muslim power in Spain are real obstacles, as the poem states. Therefore Halevi's vow in his reading is 'the complete religious life that Halevi dreamed of'.<sup>18</sup> The poem lacks any explicit biblical references. Leaving is easy because of the preciousness of the goal, despite Jerusalem lying in rubble. Another poem takes us to the threshold of his departure.

That day, when my soul longed for the place of assembly,<sup>19</sup>  
 Yet a dread of departure seized hold of me,  
 He, great in counsel, prepared for me ways for setting forth,  
 And I found His name in my heart a sustainment.  
 Therefore I bow down to Him at every stage;  
 And at every stop I thank Him.<sup>20</sup>

Here the poet clothes his longing in the words of an *ur-zionide* Ps. 84.3, נכספה וגם כלתה נפשי לחצרות יהוה. Leaving, however, is now described as not being at all easy; had God's name not lent wings to the pilgrim, fear might have taken upper hand. This is Halevi's *shem*-theology: in Halevi's poetry God's name is often inscribed on the heart,<sup>21</sup> and the condition of the heart is central. What binds many of the poems describing the pains of the voyage, is that the inner emotions of the pilgrim-poet take on a major role, whereas the destination is left merely shimmering on the horizon, mentioned in passing—yet, as such, of course it is taken for granted. What Salaman, in the translation chosen above, translated literally as the 'place of assembly', is expressed as 'the House of Destiny' in Scheindlin's translation—an attempt to give as much room as possible to an Arabic reader's reaction when a connotation to the Quranic idea of the people being assembled to be judged on the Day of Assembly is created. He writes: 'For Halevi, the site of the Temple is not merely a holy place like other holy places, not even a holy place that is holier than other holy places. It is a case of its own; the place opposite the gates

18. Scheindlin, *Distant Dove*, p. 170. Scheindlin continues his train of thought: There is no way to live a complete religious life as long as Israel is unredeemed. A messianic intervention would be a solution, but since this route seems to be blocked (i.e. the Christian and Muslim dominions do not show any signs of retreat), he writes this lament.

19. יום נכספה נפשי לבית הועד.

20. Trans. Salaman in Brody (ed.), *Selected Poems*, p. 18. For another translation, see Scheindlin, *Distant Dove*, p. 217.

21. Scheindlin, *Distant Dove*, p. 281 n. 3. In the first poem quoted above Halevi took the 'sweetness of God's name in his mouth'.



of heaven, the place where the resurrected dead will gather, as he often says'.<sup>22</sup> This definition may also give us a good reason to pick up poetic words written in a letter to Cairo on the day before Halevi begins his journey to the Land of Israel. He explains the reason for his departure. The chain of argument ascends from humanity via Israel and its priests to the highest: Moses and Aaron. In a similar way, he shows why Zion must be his goal. The Land of Israel has seen many gates of heaven, but only one is Jerusalem.

Not every living soul is human  
 and not all men are of Israel  
 and not all of Israel's men are priests  
 and not all priests Moses and Aaron.  
 And not every land is Canaan  
 and not all of Canaan the Gates of Heaven  
 and not all of the Gates of Heaven Jerusalem.<sup>23</sup>

The image of gates moves us further on. In another poem we see Halevi responding to someone from amongst his own people who reproved him for his plans to leave Spain for Zion. His reaction becomes *For the sake of the House of Our God*, from which I only offer excerpts from here, due to its length.<sup>24</sup> The poem opens with a sarcastic loan from Cant. 5.5. The friend's words are 'sweet-smelling myrrh', but in the end they will show themselves to be deceptive. What else would a Jew have that could be regarded as of a higher value than the House of God? Therefore, for the sake of the House of the Lord, one should seek her peace (למען ביתה). Psalm 122.9 has lent the wording to the previous line. The more shadowy side of history also come to the fore when Halevi denounces the sinfulness of those strangers who bend towards Jerusalem and bow down to the earth—i.e. Muslims—and those 'sires who dwelt in her as strangers, and purchased there vaults for their dead', i.e. Christians. He then makes a call in which the lethargy of present-day Jews (a theme from Kuzari; the Khazar king mocked the Jews for

22. Scheindlin, *Distant Dove*, pp. 218-19.

23. Quoted according to J. Yahalom, 'The Journey Inward: Judah Halevi between Christians and Muslims in Spain, Egypt, and Palestine', in Nicholas de Lange (ed.), *Hebrew Scholarship and Medieval World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 138-48 (146).

24. Translation of Salaman in Brody (ed.), *Selected Poems*, p. 15. Another translation in Scheindlin, *Distant Dove*, pp. 191-94.

precisely this<sup>25</sup>), is contrasted with the incomparable value of the land where the House of the Lord stood. The Jews have no other place on earth in which to put their trust. For Halevi Eretz Israel is ‘a land full of gates’ (ארץ אשר מלאה שערים). The gates of Heaven stand open opposite the gates of the Zion.<sup>26</sup>

For the sake of the House of our God, let us seek  
Her peace, or for the sake of friends and of brothers.

...

Is it well that the dead should be remembered,  
And the Ark, and the Tablets forgotten?  
That we should seek out the place of the pit and worm,  
And forsake the fount of the life eternal?  
Have we any heritage save the Sanctuaries of God?—  
Then how should we forget His Holy Mount?  
Have we either in the east or in the west  
A place of hope wherein we may trust,  
Except that land is full of gates,  
Toward which the gates of Heaven are open.

...

We may now turn to the poem quoted at the opening of this essay. Despite pairing it with Isa. 40.9 in the beginning, the poem builds mainly on Psalms.<sup>27</sup> Although it is not possible to locate it in time or indeed place, its wording leads us to discuss it here.

25. *Kuzari* 2:21-24.

26. The gates of Zion and the gates of heaven occur in several poems (also in the *Kuzari* 2:14, 23). This has its biblical roots in the story of Jacob’s ladder (Gen. 28.10-22), in which Jacob call Bethel ‘the gate of heaven’. While in rabbinic tradition this became associated with the site of the Temple, for Halevi the whole Land of Israel is full of gates, i.e. places where the prophets received revelations, in particular Jerusalem. Thus in *Ode to Zion*, ‘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’ (Scheidlin, *Distant Dove*, p. 173). Scheindlin (p. 277 n. 9.) speculates that the interest in gate-imagery shown by Halevi’s could be associated with the medieval pilgrims’ veneration of the gates of Jerusalem.

27. Simultaneously, despite the lack of explicit quotations, it is thoroughly Deutero- and Trito-Isaianic. I am indebted to my sharp-eyed colleague and co-editor of this volume, Lotta Valve, for this observation.

O lovely hill, world's joy, the Great King's home!  
 My heart is yearning for you  
 from the wide world's western edge.  
 My heart goes out to you  
 when I think of times gone by,  
 your glory gone away,  
 your Temple now a ruin.  
 If only I could perch on eagle's wings and come  
 to wet your soil and knead it with my tears!  
 For though your king is gone, and though for balm  
 you now have serpents, snakes, and scorpions,  
 yet I would seek you out and fondle, kiss your stones,  
 and taste the honey in your holy clods.<sup>28</sup>

The poem bears easily recognizable echoes from the Psalms, first of all Psalm 48, which is a song of praise for the glory of Jerusalem, 'the city of our God', 'His Holy Mountain, beautiful in elevation', the joy of all earth' (vv. 1-2, NRSV). The imagery 'on eagle's wings', here expresses the poet's eager hope for getting to Jerusalem speedily, and is linked to several passages. God carries Israel on eagle's wings in Exod. 19.4 ('I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself', NRSV) and Deut. 32.11. In Ps. 55.7-8 (MT) the singer wishes to be carried by the wings of a dove to a refuge. Somewhere, at a further distance, echoes Psalm 84. We have already seen above its two opening verses in explicit use. In v. 4 (MT) a bird does not bear the singer, but rather finds refuge for her in the Temple. Halevi clothes the deepness of affection in the image of the dust and stones of Zion thus again drawing Ps. 102.14-15 into the picture. Its promise will be one step closer when his tears moisten the dust of Jerusalem and his kisses touch its stones. The tears shed in the dust are perhaps more akin to the tears of deep emotion rather than tears of lament over the desolation of the Temple.<sup>29</sup> The final line takes the image one step further from kissing the stones: The soil of the Land of Israel is not only holy, it also tastes like honey. Here Scheindlin reads a nuance which might or might not have been explicit to a biblically informed reader. In Job 21.33 the man for whom 'the clods of the valley are sweet', dies happy. This is 'a reminder that Halevi went to the Land of Israel not primarily to live there, but to die there'.<sup>30</sup>

28. Scheindlin, *Distant Dove*, pp. 166-67.

29. So Scheindlin, *Distant Dove*, pp. 168-69.

30. Scheindlin, *Distant Dove*, p. 169.

#### 4. *On the Sea*

A short look at the poems connected with the sea voyage offering a bridge from the story to the other shore is now in order.<sup>31</sup> Recurring themes in them are luxury or the beloved ones left behind, the threatening abyss around, the raging sea, and yet the hope because of the noble goal. Two short excerpts suffice as examples.

...  
 To see even mountain or marsh would be a rest for me,  
 And the desert itself would be sweet.  
 But I look on every side and there is nothing  
 But only water and sky and ark,  
 And Leviathan making the abyss to boil.  
 ...  
 And the sea rageth and my soul exulteth—  
 For to the Sanctuary of her God she drawest near.<sup>32</sup>

If the first poem quoted paints a strong image of the destructive forces of abyss contrasted with celebrating soul who finally has set her steps on her way towards its only true destination, God's sanctuary, the second offers another contrast: His past, very dear but now left behind, and his much stronger desire to stand on the threshold of the living God's Holy mountain. The second example reads,

...  
 My desire for the living God hath constrained me  
 To seek the place of the throne of mine anointed—  
 Even so that it hath not suffered to me to kiss  
 The children of my house, my friends, and my brethren  
 ...  
 And that I have all but forgotten the house of prayer  
 In whose place of learning was my rest,  
 And that I forget the delights of my Sabbaths,  
 The beauty of my Festivals, the glory of my Passovers,  
 And have given my glory to others,  
 And forsaken my praise unto graven images.  
 ...

31. For example: eight such, of different length, with epigraphs *On the Sea*, משברי ים, are included in Brody (ed.), *Selected Poems*. For an overview (and several poems with commentary), see Yahalom, *Poetry and Pilgrimage*, pp. 107-18 (chapter 'On the sea').

32. Brody (ed.), *Selected Poems*, p. 21.

But have set my paths in the heart of the seas—  
 To the end that I may find the footstool of my God,  
 And there pour out my soul with my thoughts,  
 And stand at the threshold of His holy mount and set open  
 Towards the doors of Heaven's gates, my doors,  
 And suffer my spikenard to flower by the Waters of Jordan,  
 And put forth my shoots by Shiloah.<sup>33</sup>

...

In addition to leaving his beloved ones and his synagogue behind, Halevi has relinquished his 'praises' (שבחי). In this we see a reference to what had previously been a source of pride for him: his liturgical songs. Others may continue to sing them in his former synagogue, while he himself now counts those as nothing. We witness here a surprising—and hard—way of speaking of one's former companions in the synagogue service, referring to them as *graven images*. All this serves to sharpen the contrast.

### 5. *In Egypt, on the Threshold to Zion*

Halevi's prolonged stay in Egypt consists of four main phases: His first days are in Alexandria, and then, after the High Holidays, his departure for Cairo with the intention of joining a caravan over the desert of Sinai with his companions. This attempt itself must be regarded as an important turning point in his life, since it fails, precipitating his return to Egypt. Finally he returns to Alexandria to take the seaways to the Land of Israel, once the spring's more ideal weather conditions arrived.

From his months in Egypt we have approximately fifty poems, earthly (sometimes very earthly, including for example a poem on razor blades) and spiritual, as well as letters. A majority of the poems have been preserved in the classical *diwans*, some of them are included in the letters, and in preserving these the findings of Cairo Genizah has played a decisive role.<sup>34</sup>

The closeness of the destination, being just a few days from his goal, and the ambivalence caused by the prolonged stay, colour the words of Halevi. Zion is repeatedly present, recurring or steadily looming in the background also in the poems sent in letters during his months in Egypt.

33. Brody (ed.), *Selected Poems*, pp. 26-27.

34. For an overview, see Yahalom, 'Records of a Visitor', in Stefan C. Reif (ed.), *The Cambridge Genizah Collections: Their Contents and Significance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 123-35. Altogether, the number of fragments from Halevi in the Cairo Genizah collection is around one thousand.

One of his hosts, Ibn al-‘Ammani, gives Halevi a foretaste of the holiness of Jerusalem.

God has brought me up  
 And out of the ocean depths,  
 Those cursed bitter waters,  
 And here I am in Alexandria,  
 Among twelve wells, amid seventy palms—  
 A lovely house with lovely fragrances,  
 With nard and henna blossoms in its garden,  
 and a spring of water flowing cold and clear direct from God’s own house.  
 Here the staff of Aaron  
 Blooms with almond blossoms  
 For a Levite, new ones blooming every day.

This poem was included in a letter sent as a praise for Ibn al-‘Ammani. The abundance of hospitality leads Halevi to compare his stay to that of the Israelites on their way out of Egypt, when early on in their wandering the oasis of Elim with 12 springs and 70 palms (Exod. 15.27) served them. Ibn al-‘Ammani’s friendship is unique. Besides being the chief judge, a *dayyan*, in his community, and pious, he is from the Land of Israel. In another letter Halevi calls him ‘a righteous, pious man; a man of Jerusalem, the heir to holiness bequeathed him by his ancestors...holy people from a holy place—the Temple’s site’.<sup>35</sup> In and through al-‘Ammani Halevi may enjoy the freshening waters flowing from Jerusalem’s temple, ‘direct from God’s own house’.<sup>36</sup> Halevi speaks in prophetic words, perhaps especially those of Ezekiel 47 where the waters from the Temple renew the Dead Sea, or Isaiah who (e.g. Isa. 12.3; 44.3-4 etc.) anticipates the renewal of the desert through the waters of the messianic era.

The journey continued to Cairo. One can at least speculate at the possibility for him to re-enact the Exodus on his pilgrimage.<sup>37</sup> This failed attempt to ride to the Holy Land leads him to return to Egypt with very mixed feelings.

35. Scheindlin, *Distant Dove*, p. 106.

36. Scheindlin, *Distant Dove*, p. 105.

37. Or, as Yahalom suggests, the route was simply the regular route for Spanish pilgrims. This was also the route chosen by another later wanderer and poet Judah al-Ḥarizi (Yahalom, ‘Records of a Visitor’, p. 129.) In spite of practical issues, e.g., that there were Jewish settlement along the way, this does not exclude the association with the Exodus.

Opinions diverge with regards to the context of the poem *Praise above all cities be unto Egypt*.<sup>38</sup> It is a response to a companion who wishes to stay in Egypt—should it not suffice as a destination because of its magnificent biblical history? Or might it be Halevi’s reaction after his failed attempt to ride to the Land of Israel?<sup>39</sup>

The poem begins with a wordy praise of Egypt. The Exodus, not surprisingly plays a central role. In Egypt Moses, the most valued vine, was raised, and in Egypt God himself stepped down to earth (in the cloud and the pillar of fire). Then a shift occurs,

...  
 I know the Shekhinah has turned aside here  
 like a guest to the shade of oak and terebinth  
 but in Salem and Zion she is like a resident  
 for there is the Torah and there is the grandeur.

...  
 To descend from her sanctity to Babylon  
 or to Egypt is to trespass against her.  
 But when a man goes up from any country  
 to Zion, it is the highest of virtues.

It is not necessary to take a stand here. If read as a reaction to critics after his return, Halevi admits that he, by returning from the gates of the Land of Israel, has trespassed the law of not changing the Land for another land. Alternatively, he instructs others. In both cases the exalted status of the Land of Israel is highlighted. The Jews are prohibited from changing the Land for any other land.<sup>40</sup> Despite Egypt’s glorious role in the early phase of God’s plans, the *Shekhinah* ‘has now turned aside’. Both God’s presence and the Torah moved their dwelling to Zion and Halevi’s return is of course only temporary. The highest virtue, to move to Israel, lies

38. Here in Yahalom’s translation (*Poetry and Pilgrimage*, p. 141), in excerpts.

39. For the first alternative, see Brody’s own heading for this poem (*Selected Poems*, p. 33), and Scheindlin, *Distant Dove*, p. 280 n. 12; for the second, Yahalom (*Poetry and Pilgrimage*, p. 140).

40. *Tosefta*, ‘*Abod. Zar.* 4.4. *Tosefta* records a warning example attributed to R. Simeon: ‘Elimelech was one of the great men of his time and one of those who sustained the generation. And because he went abroad, he and his sons died in famine. But all the Israelites were able to survive on their own land’ (Jacob Neusner, *The Tosefta Translated from the Hebrew with a New Introduction* (2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), p. 1275. Also the words of the Torah, directly connected with Egypt, Deut. 17.16, ‘You must never return to that way again’, as well as Exod. 14.13 and Deut. 28.68 may loom in the background.

ahead. Yahalom notes Halevi's masterful play on the root עלה. Egypt shall be *praised above all cities* (עלי כל עיר תהלה). Halevi, by going to Cairo, has made an *aliyah*. The *aliyah* of the highest rank will naturally follow, for to ascend (עלה) to Zion is the highest of virtues (לציון מעלה היא לו) (מעולה).<sup>41</sup>

While Halevi's social life, and even his business, was active during the months after the failed attempt, a growing longing can be discerned, and once again we see him dreaming of being carried by eagle's wings. His whole desire is to fulfil Ps. 102.14-15.

Can bodies of clay  
Be prison-houses  
For hearts bound fast  
To eagles wings—  
For a man life-weary  
Whose whole desire  
Is to lay his face  
In the chosen dust?<sup>42</sup>

Thanks to second hand documentation in the form of letters, we are rather well-informed about Halevi's last days in Egypt. In May 1141 he boards the ship that would eventually take him to the Land of Israel. Whether he ever reached Zion, or not, remains an open question. The turns and details of the last part of the pilgrimage disappear into the dust. Yahalom argues, with emphasis, that we have no reason to doubt that he landed safely in Acre, which was the main port. Some evidence has also been brought to light from the Cambridge Geniza collection by S.D. Goitein. Two letters document Halevi's final weeks. His ship set sail on 14 May, which was the day of Shavuot, and if he died in July, as another letter documents, and if one allows ten days for the voyage, he had more than a month to explore the Land of Israel.<sup>43</sup> A touching sixteenth-century narrative, recorded by Gedaliah Ibn Yahya (*Shalshet HaQabbalah*, 92 [Venice 1587]), tells a story of Judah's end at the gates of Jerusalem; when he, bowed to the

41. Yahalom, 'Diwan and Odyssey: Judah Halevi and the Secular Poetry of Medieval Spain in the Light of New Discoveries from Petersburg', *MEAH*, seccion Hebreo 44 (1995), pp. 23-45 (41).

42. Brody (ed.), *Selected Poems*, pp. 39-43.

43. See Yahalom, 'Records of a Visitor', pp. 132-33. Of great interest would, of course, be the letter of Nathan b. Samuel he-Haver, a scribe from the Jewish community of the Land of Israel, which describes Halevi's last phases in more detail, for example, that he 'experienced *Shekhinah* and the appearance of the Divine Presence at the gates of Jerusalem. See, Yahalom, 'Records of a Visitor', p. 133.



ground, embracing the dust and stones, as it was meant to be, reciting—no text other than Psalm 102 alluded to in his *Ode to Zion*—which later on is canonized and included in the Ashkenazi prayers on the *Tisha' B'Av*—gets trampled to death by an Arab horseman.<sup>44</sup> While perhaps little historical value should be put on this story, it does close the circle and pins both Judah Halevi and his *Ode* in the history with a standing comparable to that of Rabbi Aqiva reciting the last syllable of *Shema Israel* at the moment of his martyrdom (*b. Ber.* 61b).

I conclude with some excerpts—due to its length—from this, best-known of Halevi's poems in Scheindlin's translation.<sup>45</sup> Some lines have already been referred to, the imagery is familiar at this point of the essay, and a careful reader can easily, without any further guidance, recognize for example the imagery from Psalm 102, as well as the themes of *Shekhinah* and the hope of a bright dawn of redemption.

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.

...

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,

44. Scheindlin, *Distant Dove*, pp. 249-52; Yahalom, *Poetry and Pilgrimage*, pp. 8-15.

45. Scheindlin, *Distant Dove*, pp. 172-76. For other translations, see, e.g., Carmi, *Hebrew Verse*, pp. 347-49; Brody (ed.), *Selected Poems*, pp. 3-7 (a rhymed version, pp. 151-56).

throw my face down to your ground,  
fondle your gravel and caress your soil.

...

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.

### 6. *Pilgrim's Motivation: Personal Spiritual Growth or an Exemplary Move?*

Halevi never gives a systematic account of the deepest motivation for his pilgrimage. What led him to the dramatic decision to abandon his own safety in a late phase of life and to set out on a dangerous travel, with the intention of—obviously—never returning? Was it first and foremost his personal enterprise for spiritual elevation or was it—perhaps—an exemplary deed, with the utmost goal of summoning all the rest of his people to join in the *aliyah*? The motif of Halevi's pilgrimage has been interpreted with different emphases.<sup>46</sup>

In his *Song of a Distant Dove*, Raymond P. Scheindlin's conclusion, put emphatically forward, is 'Halevi's personal piety and religious vision'.<sup>47</sup> For Scheindlin the pilgrimage 'was the act of a man who had given up on the masses and the leaders of his people and on the idea of imminent redemption altogether, but who believed that there were steps that a person could take who wanted to come as close as possible to the divine presence'.<sup>48</sup> In this reading, the purpose of the pilgrimage was not to summon other Jews to follow him. Every now and then one can see how important it is for the author to exclude any smallest option for a nationalistic interpretation.<sup>49</sup> Instead, Halevi is portrayed as a pilgrim who 'goes

46. Malkiel, 'Three Perspectives on Judah Halevi's Voyage to Palestine', *Mediterranean Historical Review* 25.1 (2010), pp. 1-15, gives an excellent overview.

47. Scheindlin, *Song of a Distant Dove*, p. 156.

48. Scheindlin, *Song of a Distant Dove*, pp. 160-61.

49. See, e.g., Scheindlin's comments on *My Heart is in the East (Distant Dove)*, pp. 169-70). According to him Halevi has totally abandoned all hopes of 'a speedy messianic return to the East and replaced this hope with a private dream of his individual return'. He stresses that 'the poem offers no summons to action'.

a solitary way'.<sup>50</sup> In a somewhat similar way, his wandering becomes a practice of penitence. He wanted 'to fight the strain of worldliness in his own makeup' along his solitary pilgrimage.<sup>51</sup>

Scheindlin's conspicuous stress should be viewed against another, opposite, trend, whose most prominent spokesperson is Ezra Fleischer. In saying this I am much indebted to two critically lucid essays, one by D.J. Malkiel in the *Mediterranean Historical Review* and the other, a review essay, by L.J. Kaplan in *Jewish Quarterly Review*.<sup>52</sup> Fleischer's Judah becomes a proto-zionist, whose departure from Spain for the better in the Land of Israel, should first and foremost be seen as a nationally-inspired and ideological-oriented program. It is a migration, rather than a pilgrimage. 'The poet's act was intended to serve as a model. He sought to delineate for Spain's Jews, for Judaism, a possible, recommended route to survival, in any case another option—proud and independent—of existence.'<sup>53</sup> Fleischer, with his nationalistic understanding, does not stand alone, but has had a number of predecessors offering differing nuances.<sup>54</sup> Understandably this aspect, when taken to the extreme, has been a target of hard and justified criticism. Scheindlin's stress in his monograph is one of the most pronounced and profound. Neither is he alone in this, but has had several companions from Abraham Geiger onwards. When articulated in words expressing a downright individualistic interpretation, this approach might be as far from the truth, as the Zionistically coloured one. Lawrence Kaplan contrast Scheindlin's one-sidedness with several words in Halevi's poems and *Kuzari*, in which the poet is longing for the awakening and redemption of the nation. Here we can, partly guided by

50. Scheindlin, *Song of a Distant Dove*, p. 160.

51. Scheindlin, *Distant Dove*, pp. 103-104. A letter to Halfon, written during Halevi's stay in Alexandria, shows how uncomfortable he is in the midst of all the abundance of attention he gets. Halfon Ben Natanel Halevi, a merchant in Cairo, was an important link for Halevi, whose archive eventually ended in being stored in the famous Cairo Geniza. On this, see, e.g., Yahalom, *Poetry and Pilgrimage*, p. x. For the penitential aspect, see also Yahalom, 'Records of a Visitor', pp. 128-29, '...every such journey has an element of seeking forgiveness'.

52. See David J. Malkiel, 'Three Perspectives', and Lawrence J. Kaplan, "'The Starlings Caw": Judah Halevi as Philosopher, Poet, and Pilgrim', *JQR* 101.1 (2011), pp. 97-132.

53. Ezra Fleischer in an article, 'The Essence of Our Land and Its Meaning—Towards a Portrait of Judah Halevi on the Basis of Genizah Documents', *Pe'amim* 68 (1996), pp. 4-15 (Hebrew); here quoted in translation by David J. Malkiel ('Three Perspectives', p. 2).

54. For an overview, see Malkiel, 'Three Perspectives'.

Kaplan, connect back to the dialogue of *Kuzari*, which was opened at the beginning of this essay. The rabbi's reply to the King culminates in 5.27, as follows,

When people become aroused to love this holy place and to press for the anticipated event, this too generates a great reward. Thus it says, 'You shall arise and have mercy upon Zion, for it is time to be gracious to it, for the allotted time has arrived. For your servants have desired its stones, and they favour its dust'. This means that Jerusalem will be rebuilt when the Jewish people yearn for it to the ultimate degree, to the point where they favour its stones and dust.<sup>55</sup>

This excerpt, beginning and ending with 'people of Israel', should exclude any one-sided stress on the individual only. *The people*, not only a single pious, should embrace the stones and the dust of Zion. Scheindlin, however, reads into the dialogue of the King and the rabbi another, less conspicuous aspect: The King, now a convert to Judaism, is *not* urged by the rabbi to emigrate to the Land of Israel, as if the rabbi lacked all interest in inviting the Jewish people to follow. Kaplan, however, points towards a simple explanation for this: the King is a convert, not equal to a native-born Jew. At the beginning of his reply to the King, in *Kuzari* 5.23—after the king has wondered why one should seek the *Shekhinah* in a particular place—the rabbi explains that it is only the visible Presence which has disappeared, but it can be experienced in a particular place by any *native-born* Israelite.

Only the Divine Presence that was seen face-to-face is gone. It was only revealed to a prophet or to a favored group of people at a special place ... However, the hidden, intangible Divine Presence is with *every native Jew*, provided he adheres to the true religion and is of refined deed, pure heart, and clean soul, all directed toward God.<sup>56</sup>

Although said here in passing, this distinction is important for Halevi, as can be seen in *Kuzari* 1:115. A convert may 'enjoy a large degree of closeness to God', but 'a convert is not equal to a Jew from birth, because only the Jews from birth can achieve prophecy'.<sup>57</sup>

55. *Kuzari*, trans. Korobkin, p. 311.

56. 5:23, trans. Korobkin, p. 308.

57. See also 1:27. Converts are 'rewarded as we are, just not to the same degree'. For a broader discussion on this topic, see also Lasker, *Eschatology*, pp. 97-102.

In view of this, one cannot simply deny the strong stress on the gathering of the pious, native-born, found in Kuzari and visible in several poems. Kaplan refers to, as does Scheindlin, to the *Ode to Zion* and its latter part: Halevi sees himself as one of the group of elected pious ones, ‘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’.<sup>58</sup> Although the journey might be solitary, he envisions a gathering of the holy men which will bring forth the return of the visible *Shekhinah*. So, perhaps a path closest to truth might be found somewhere between the two lines of interpretation described above; in any case, as Malkiel puts it, ‘the assumption that there needs to be a single, catalysing motive is debatable’ and Kaplan states ‘we have here a delicate and complex weave of individual and national, pietistic and redemptive motifs’.<sup>59</sup>

### 7. *The End*

Using some poems, or excerpts of poems, as stepping-stones we have followed in the footsteps of a pilgrim who managed to put his deep affection for Zion in words so far unrivalled. Judah Halevi’s *zionides*, full of intensive biblically-inspired imagery, open a window into a heart of man who set his step decisively towards the site where *Shekhinah* once dwelled, where it can be experienced—by a native born Jew—and where it can be brought back.

For Halevi, Zion is ‘the only place in which to put one’s trust’, ‘gates of Heaven’, ‘Great King’s home’, ‘God’s bosom’, where ‘God appeared to the prophets’ and ‘*Shekhinah* is one’s neighbour’, with holiness even in its ‘clods of clay’, its ‘stones and dust’, the ‘Holy Mount’, from which the reviving waters flow.

Pilgrims, in the words of Richard Niebuhr, ‘are persons in motion—passing through territories not their own—seeking...completion, or... clarity..., a goal to which only the spirit’s compass points the way’.<sup>60</sup> In the opening lines of this study I compared the quest of a biblical scholar to that of a pilgrim. What then could the concluding line be? Perhaps this

58. Kaplan, *The Starling’s Caw*, p. 112; Scheindlin, *Distant Dove*, pp. 180-81. Translation is that of the latter.

59. Malkiel, *Three Perspectives*, p. 9; Kaplan, *The Starling’s Caw*, p. 116.

60. Richard Niebuhr, ‘Pilgrims and Pioneers’, *Parabola* 9.3 (1984), pp. 6-13. Quoted according to Davidson and Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage*, p. xvii.

suffices: Happy is the scholar who is able to undertake his journey led by a burning passion, cherishing the dust and the stones of the Holy place, in a constant yearning for a deeper understanding—and who inspires his disciples and companions to follow the expedition onwards!

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