

HILLEL
HALKIN
YEHUDA
HALEVI



In 1099 the army of the First Crusade, having fought its way overland from Europe, reached Palestine and conquered Jerusalem from its Seljuk rulers, Turkish Muslims who had taken it from the Egyptian Fatimids a few years earlier. The Crusaders' siege of the city ended with the mass slaughter of its Muslim and Jewish inhabitants, many of the latter herded into a synagogue in the Jewish Quarter and burned alive. Determined to Christianize Jerusalem permanently, the Crusaders barred Jews and Muslims from resettling there. Apart from a period following the failed Bar-Kochba Revolt of 132–135 C.E., when the Romans, too, had declared Jerusalem off limits to Jews, the city had never lacked a Jewish presence since the days of David and Solomon. Its Jewish community under Muslim rule, although small, had allowed Jews to feel they still had a share in it. Now the last vestige of them had been expelled.

This development ended a century whose closing decades witnessed an ominous decline in Jewish fortunes in both the Muslim and Christian worlds. First had come the massacre in Granada; then the anti-Jewish legislation of Gregory VII, the first pope to forbid, in 1078, Christian rulers to employ Jews; then the religious discrimination of the Almoravids; and finally, in 1096, as the First Crusade was getting under way, frightful pogroms in the Rhine-

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land, where thousands of Jews were massacred. Although no one could have foreseen it clearly at the time, the long descent into the brutal anti-Semitism of the later Middle Ages had begun.

Symbolically, the slaughter in Jerusalem was the most disturbing of these events. Jerusalem was not Granada, Mainz, or Speier; it was the city Jews prayed for every day and turned to face in each of their prayers. Now, murdered in it and banned from it, they watched helplessly as Christians and Muslims jostled over it in a war that drove home the reality of Jewish impotence. On the Temple Mount, the most sacred of Jewish sites, the El-Aksa Mosque became the Church of St. Abraham, an image of the crucified Christ hanging above its altar. In an intricately punning *piyyut* written sometime after 1099, Yehuda Halevi called on his fellow Jews to pray for Jerusalem's welfare while imploring God to take vengeance on its conquerors and "roast them with coals made from their Cross [*u'tzlem be'gahaley tzelem*]." It was a punishment fantasized to fit the Crusaders' crime of burning Jews in their synagogues.

Most likely it was after 1099, too, that Halevi had a dream about Jerusalem. We know that, like most people of his age, he took his dreams seriously. In the medieval Muslim world, dreams were thought to have revelatory and predictive powers, and hundreds of manuals were written to codify and interpret their symbols. These guides, whose prototype was the second-century Artimedorus' *Interpretation of Dreams*, were of a general nature and treated dream imagery as invariable for all dreamers. Thus, for example, according to the Sufi author Abd-el-Malik el-Kharkushi, who died in the early eleventh century, a dreamed-of butcher signified

impending hardship; a cook, joy and marriage; a turtle, a gift from a foreign land; and so on.

One dream manual probably read by Halevi was written by El-Kharkushi's younger contemporary Avicenna (980–1037). Avicenna's understanding of dreams was more psychological than El-Kharkushi's. The great majority, he held, reflected purely subjective mental states. Produced by the continued functioning of the imaginative faculty while the intellect was asleep, they might consist of jumbled memories of the previous day's events, expressions of unfulfilled desires, or the random associations of a mind freed from the restraints of reason. Yet some had a more objective reality. These were occasioned by a "divine force" that revealed hidden things to worthy individuals and informed them of future dangers or good tidings—the dangers being usually imminent, as God did not wish to keep the righteous in a state of prolonged anxiety, the tidings often of far-off events whose anticipation increased the dreamer's pleasure. Such "true dreams," wrote Avicenna, frequently assumed an explicit rather than a symbolic form and were sometimes sent to reassure persons in distress.

Halevi related his dream in a short poem:

Your dwellings, Lord, are places of love,
 And Your nearness is clear as things seen, not guessed
of.

My dream took me to Your Temple's mount to sing
 In all its lovely worshiping and bring
 My offerings with their libations.
 Around me swirled thick smoke and ministrations,
 Sweet to my ears, of Levites at their stations.

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I woke, but when I did You still were there
For me to thank You as befits my prayer.

Jerusalem and its holy places were despoiled. Comfortingly, Halevi dreamed that he had seen them in their erstwhile grandeur and taken part in the Temple's rites while the smoke of sacrifice rose around him. Since he was a Levite himself, his dream was also of his own sense of religious vocation—and since he was a composer of sacred poetry, of his literary calling as well. The Hebrew word *shir* means both “song” and “poem,” so that “to sing” in the poem's third line can also mean “to make poetry.”

“Your Dwellings, Lord” has another dimension, too. We have seen how Halevi was drawn to the paradox that “the Place of the world, which is not His place,” to cite a rabbinic epithet for God, could nonetheless dwell in the world. And yet though this was a conundrum that human reason could not resolve, God's dreamed “nearness” is as “clear as things seen.” What is unknowable to the intellect, “Your Dwellings, Lord” proclaims, can be grasped by direct experience.

Halevi's dream was a powerful one. Like much in his verse, it cannot be definitely dated. But if we look at his remarkable sequence of poems about Jerusalem and the Land of Israel that came to be known to posterity as his *shirey tsiyon*, or “songs of Zion,” “Your Dwellings, Lord” may have been the first of them. This is because, unlike the others, it does not express the thought or hope of an actual journey to Zion. It is as if, when Halevi wrote it, such a hope did not yet exist—or, going a step farther, as if the hope were engendered by the dream. In the language of Avicenna,

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Eykb et'amá et asbér okbál v'éykb
How will I taste what I eat and how
ye'eráv?
will it be sweet?

Eykbá ashalém n'darái ve'esarái, b'ód
How will I pay my vows and my oaths when

Tsiyón b'ḥével edóm va'aní
Zion is in the domain of Edom and I am
b'kbével aráv?
in the chain of Arabia?

Yeykál b'eynai azón
It would be easy for me to leave
kol tuv s'farád, k'mó
all the goodness of Spain, as

Yeykár b'eynai r'ót
It would be precious for me to see
afrót d'vír neḥeráv.
the dust of the Shrine that is in ruins.

In formal terms, “My Heart in the East” is easily described. It has three long lines, each consisting of twenty-eight or twenty-nine syllables and breaking into two hemistiches. Its Arabic-style meter can be notated as long-long-short long-long-short long-long-long-short long-long-short-long; however, as this does not always coincide with natural syllabic stress, I have indicated the latter with accent marks above the stressed vowels. The poem’s three lines rhyme in *-rav*, as does its first hemistich. It has one pun, a

double play on *hevel*, “domain” but also “rope,” and *khevel*, “chain,” and three phonetically linked pairs of words: *mizrah*, “East,” and *ma’arav*, “West,” *yeykal*, “it would be little,” and *yeykar*, “it would be precious,” and *tuḅ s’farad*, “the goodness of Spain,” and *d’vir neherav*, “the Shrine [i.e., Temple] in ruins.”

All this is cut and dried. But “My Heart in the East” is a living poem—and a perfect one. It is a miniature marvel of balance in which opposites tug in different directions while remaining musically joined; an answer to a riddle that asks what, though torn in two, remains whole; the last moment of equipoise in a man tensing his muscles to jump and to take Jewish history with him.