

## Daniel J. Lasker, Book Reviews

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RAYMOND P. SCHEINDLIN, *The Song of the Distant Dove: Judah Halevi's Pilgrimage*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008. xii, 310 pp. £30.00. ISBN 978-0-19-531542-4.

JOSEPH YAHALOM, *Yehuda Halevi: Poetry and Pilgrimage*, translated by GABRIEL LEVIN. Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 2009. xiv, 230 pp. \$70.00. ISBN 978-965-493-324-7.

ADAM SHEAR, *The Kuzari and the Shaping of Jewish Identity, 1167-1900*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008. xvi, 384 pp. £50.00. ISBN 978-0521-88533-1.

DOV SCHWARTZ (ed.), *Commentary on the Kuzari: Heshek Shelomoh by R. Shelomoh Ben Yehuda of Lunel*. Bar-Ilan University Press, Ramat-Gan, 2007. 550 pp. (Hebrew). \$55.00. ISBN 965-226-304-4.

Rabbi Judah ben Samuel Halevi was a central figure in medieval Jewish culture whose poems have entered the liturgy and whose philosophical / theological work *The Book of Kuzari* has provided untold generations of Jews with inspiration, encouragement and arguments for the truth of Judaism. As Scheindlin points out (p. 255, n. 5),

Halevi was not a practising rabbi, but his contemporaries referred to him in this manner as an honorific. In addition to his literary legacy, Halevi's abandonment of Iberia at an advanced age for the dangerous pilgrimage to the Land of Israel, made more poignant by the late, unsubstantiated account of his murder at the gates of Jerusalem by a Muslim horseman, has captured the imagination of many Jews, especially in our own generation which has seen a collective return to Zion. Yet, despite a relative wealth of relevant material, including a number of autograph letters and other important documents discovered in the Cairo Geniza, very little is known about his life (including where and when he was born and where he spent most of his life while still in Iberia). In light of Halevi's prominence, it is not surprising that there have been ongoing attempts to reconstruct his biography, to understand his personal motivations, to interpret his writings, and to evaluate his place in Jewish history. Two of the books under discussion here discuss Halevi's life and pilgrimage to the Land of Israel in light of his poetry; the third book is a reception history of Halevi's *magnum opus*, and the fourth presents an edition of an early commentary on the *Kuzari*.

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Raymond P. Scheindlin's *The Song of the Distant Dove* (the title is based on one of Halevi's poems) and Joseph Yahalom's *Yehuda Halevi: Poetry and Pilgrimage* cover much of the same ground. Both authors believe that an analysis of Halevi's poetry in conjunction with a close reading of Geniza documents can help answer central questions about Halevi's biography, especially in the years toward the end of his life. Did Halevi leave Iberia after a lifetime of activity there for reasons of personal piety or to help bring about the messianic redemption? Was his companion Isaac the son of the prominent Sephardic intellectual Abraham ibn Ezra about whose ties with Halevi we know from the former's biblical commentaries? When did he begin to compose the *Kuzari*? Why did he stay in Egypt from September 1140 until May 1141 rather than proceeding immediately with his pilgrimage? Did he attempt to reach the Land of Israel by a land route from Cairo before finally leaving by boat from Alexandria? Did Halevi indeed reach the shores of the Land of Israel? Can anything be known about his death in the summer of 1141?

Scheindlin and Yahalom agree on certain aspects of Halevi's life. Both advance his birth date to the middle of the 1080s rather than the usually more accepted 1075 propounded, e.g., by Moshe Gil and Ezra Fleischer,<sup>1</sup> and they agree that he actually reached the Land of Israel. They differ on other details, especially the motivation behind the pilgrimage. One of the reasons why reconstructing Halevi's biography is so difficult is the impossibility of knowing when and where each of his poems was written. Though some editors of collections of Halevi's poetry (the *diwans*, short discussions of which are appended to Yahalom's book) have added superscriptions intended to identify the circumstances of each poem's composition, there is no guarantee that such attributions are correct. Furthermore, the Geniza letters are generally undated, leaving them open to varying interpretations. Thus, although Halevi's sojourn in Egypt is well documented, through his poetry and the Geniza discoveries, some issues remained unresolved. One prominent example is Halevi's putative attempt to travel to the Land of Israel from Cairo; Yahalom accepts this as factual (pp. 139–147), while Scheindlin rejects it (pp. 269–270, n. 20). Furthermore, Yahalom identifies Halevi's travel companion, Isaac ibn Ezra, as the son of Abraham ibn Ezra (p. 167); such a relationship is denied by Scheindlin (p. 268, n. 3).

<sup>1</sup> *Yehuda Ha-Levi and his Circle: 55 Geniza Documents*, Jerusalem, 2001 (Heb.). Despite both authors' criticism of this work, its publication and analysis of these Geniza documents was indispensable for their own work.

Perhaps the strongest disagreement between Scheindlin and Yahalom has to do with Judah Halevi's motivation in making the pilgrimage to the Land of Israel. Yahalom gives a 'Zionist' interpretation of Halevi, saying specifically: 'My approach to R. Judah Halevi's poetry and life was undoubtedly influenced by my and my teachers' Land of Israel background . . . I accept full responsibility for this approach' (p. xiii). Scheindlin, however, constantly polemicalises against such an understanding, seeing Halevi's move as motivated by personal piety as summed up in the word *tawakkul* (trust in God) and nothing more. Although Scheindlin makes some references to the *Kuzari* and the Jewish protagonist's leave-taking from the King of the Khazars, he does not give sufficient weight to the evidence contained in that book. True, the *haver* in the *Kuzari* does not encourage the King to journey with him (pp. 61, 161–162), but that may very well be more an indication of Halevi's view concerning the sub-Jewish status of converts than his lack of desire for native-born Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel (cf. *Kuzari* 5:23 where the *haver* admits that the 'visible Shekhinah' is no longer in the Land of Israel, but the 'hidden Shekhinah' there is still valuable for the native-born Jew, namely not for the proselyte). Indeed, Halevi stresses the messianic theme in his multiple references to the soil and stones of the Land of Israel (based on Ps. 102:15, what Scheindlin calls Halevi's 'talismanic verse') in both the poetry and the *Kuzari*, and the necessity for Jews to love that soil and stones in order to bring redemption. He praises the patriarchs who made the supreme effort of moving to the Land of Israel, despite its being in the hands of foreign nations, in anticipation of God's deliverance, perhaps prefiguring his own pilgrimage. Furthermore, Halevi criticises Jews for not loving the Land of Israel as much as Christians and Muslims and blames the lack of redemption in the Second Temple period to Jewish refusal to hear the call of God to return to the Land, preferring instead their comfortable lives in the exile (*Kuzari* 2:20–24). Most likely Halevi did not believe that his own personal pilgrimage would necessarily bring about the redemption, and his arrival in the Land of Israel was not intended to have political messianic overtones as was the case of the mostly Karaite Mourners of Zion movement in the tenth and eleventh centuries, but Scheindlin's total denial of such a connection is not reasonable.

As noted, both books cite Halevi's poetry at length, providing English translations. Those of Scheindlin, who has long had a reputation for his excellent renditions of Hebrew poetry, are much more elegiac and enchanting. Thus, Halevi's lament for his lost youth is entitled in the Yahalom volume: 'Past fifty and still in pursuit of youth' (p. 113); in Scheindlin, it is 'Still chasing fun at fifty, like a boy!' (p. 185). Or compare: 'Girls on the riverbank, a bevy of fawns / linger, their wrists heavy with bangles—anklets clipping their gait' (Yahalom, p. 148); with 'Beside the Nile are girls, and not just one or two; gazelles, yet different from gazelles, for not as fleet—their arms weighed down with heavy bracelets, golden anklets heavy on their legs' (Scheindlin, p. 125). Presumably the translations in Yahalom's book are those of the translator Gabriel Levin, who rendered the original Hebrew volume (שירת חיייו של ר' יהודה הלוי, Jerusalem, 2008) into English.

While neither Scheindlin's nor Yahalom's book is the last, definitive word on the interface between Judah Halevi's poetry and biography, both are welcome additions to a growing literature which addresses itself to the life and literary legacy of this icon from medieval Sepharad.

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Halevi's impact upon the Jewish world was almost immediate after his death. His poetry entered the liturgy and his *Kuzari* was one of the first Judaeo-Arabic philosophical books translated into Hebrew (by Judah ibn Tibbon, in approximately 1167). How this book was received by the Jewish world and eventually became canonical

is the subject of Adam Shear's monograph, which looks far beyond the immediate circumstances of Judah Halevi's life and literary endeavours. Shear's book is the first reception history of a major Jewish book and demonstrates how important such a treatment is for writing Jewish intellectual history.

Shear's work is an attempt to understand how the *Kuzari* attained the status which it has enjoyed among varying sectors of the Jewish population. He provides a wide ranging bibliographical account of every edition of the *Kuzari* as well as multiple citations of the work. But this reception history is more than a collection of sources; it presents a narrative whose argument is as follows: 'Various readers interpreted the work in manifold ways and made strategic choices about whether and how to disseminate the work to serve particular cultural and intellectual agendas' (p. viii). Along the way, Shear demonstrates that twentieth- and twenty-first-century understandings of Judah Halevi, e.g. that he and Moses Maimonides are two intellectual opposites—Halevi the anti-rationalist poet and Maimonides the intellectualist philosopher—are not inevitable interpretations of the relation between the *Kuzari* and other expositions of Jewish thought. Just as previous interpretations of Halevi served the purposes of those who propounded them, the contemporary view of Halevi is also a function of present-day needs.

The picture Shear draws is a multi-faceted one which cannot be described here in detail. Starting in Provence, Ibn Tibbon's translation of the *Kuzari* made its way to all segments of the Hebrew speaking diaspora. Read by Jews from Spain to Poland, from rationalists to rejecters of rationalism, from traditional believers to proponents of the Enlightenment, and from Rabbanites to Karaites (whose nineteenth-century leader, Abraham Firkovich, fraudulently claimed to have found the graves of Isaac Sangari, the traditional name of the *haver* who converted the King of the Khazars; and his wife 'Sangarit' in the Karaite cemetery of Chufut-Kale in the Crimea); the book became a mainstay of an unwritten canon of Jewish religious writings. The *Kuzari's* attraction lay precisely in its multivalenced defense of Judaism allowing readers to interpret the book as they saw fit.

Shear is aware that despite his exhaustive treatment of the subject, his pioneering work may still be missing some relevant sources or perhaps be misinterpreting the material which he did unearth. Therefore, he has launched a website (<http://kuzarireception.blogspot.com/>) where he has begun recording updates and corrections. It would be helpful, for instance, to include the reception of the *Kuzari* in Arabic speaking countries, something which is all but missing in Shear's work (he admits that it is more a reception history of the Ibn Tibbon translation than of the *Kuzari* itself; p. 12, n. 53). One of the Arabic readers of the *Kuzari* was Sa'd ibn Mansur ibn Kammuna (d. 1284), who copied large swatches of it in his works and who is left unmentioned in this book. The use of the internet is just the latest stage in a long reception history of the *Kuzari*, so competently described by Adam Shear.

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One step on the path of the reception history of the *Kuzari* was the attitude toward Halevi in a circle of Provençal rationalists at the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries. Dov Schwartz's edition of Solomon ben Judah of Lunel's commentary on Judah Halevi's *Kuzari* is intended not only to bring to the attention of a wider audience a much neglected author, and the members of his circle, some of whom also wrote commentaries on the *Kuzari*, but also to demonstrate the ironical way in which Halevi's anti-philosophical work was made to seem compatible with the Aristotelian rationalism of Maimonides. According to Schwartz's reconstruction, based on this commentary and additional material, most of which is still unpublished, Jewish thinkers in Provence adopted Judah Halevi's *Kuzari* as an authoritative

work but interpreted it as expressing rationalistic arguments. This finding reinforces Adam Shear's contention that previous generations interpreted the *Kuzari* differently than our generation, and such understandings were a function of the intellectual needs of the time.

In a major introduction to the text, Schwartz gives a number of examples of this most peculiar interpretation of the *Kuzari*. The special quality which Halevi thought resided only in Jews, inherited from Adam through special individuals until it became widespread among all of Jacob's descendants, is made to be a rational, rather than a biological, faculty. The 'divine faculty' or 'divine order' (*amr ilahilinyan elohi*) is seen purely as a force which is captured by the intellect and not by Jews qua Jews. Halevi's references to 'divine injunctions' which are foreign to the intellect are understood as commandments which are understood only by people with superior rational understanding. Human perfection is not spiritual but, indeed, intellectual. In other words, 300 years after its composition, Halevi's *Kuzari* was detached from its original setting and utilised by a circle of rationalistic thinkers to justify their own understanding of Judaism, an understanding presumably far removed from Halevi's original intention.

As a result of Solomon ben Judah's tendentious interpretation of the *Kuzari*, now made available in a richly annotated edition, readers who turn to that commentary in hopes, for instance, of achieving a better comprehension of difficult passages in the book will be disappointed. They will learn about Solomon ben Judah and his circle, not about the *Kuzari*. As a result, they will be introduced into a world which had been ignored by most students of Jewish thought until the important studies of Dov Schwartz.

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Although Judah Halevi's thought had a greater impact on Judaism than that of Maimonides, it is the latter scholar who has generally been the center of attention of historians of Jewish philosophy, perhaps because they see themselves as part of the intellectual elite to whom Maimonides was addressing his works. The four books discussed here are unlikely to redress the imbalance given the continued scholarly fascination with Maimonides; and at the same time as these books were being published, there also appeared quite a number of proceedings of conferences held in 2004 to note 800 years from the death of Maimonides. Yet, as a group they testify to the remarkable progress which has been made in the study of Judah Halevi's life, poetry and thought and indicate directions for further research.

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