

Video Clip: Yehuda HaLevi

The Legendary Poet

Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi lived at the end of the Golden Age of Spain but may be the most famous of the Hebrew poets from that time. He wrote both secular poems and religious liturgy that is sung in homes and in synagogues to this day. Included in his poems were his philosophical ideas and spiritual yearnings, further developed in his work, *The Kuzari*.

Suggested Implementations

Jewish History

1. Golden Age of Spain
2. Land of Israel

Jewish Philosophy

1. *The Kuzari*
2. *Zemiroth Shabbat*

Background

Yehuda HaLevi (1075-1141) is the most famous Hebrew poet of the Middle Ages and perhaps the most admired Hebrew poet of all time. Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, also known as the RIHaL, was born in Christian Spain (Tudela) and educated at the famous Yeshiva of Rabbi Yitshak Alfasi (RIF) in Lucena. After moving back to his hometown, he got married and had a daughter before relocating to Cordoba where he served as a physician.

He lived at the end of the so-called Golden Age of Spain, so while he practiced medicine, he also explored the world of poetry and fell in love with it. He became quite versed in Arabic and Castilian poetry. Many of his poems were charming and frivolous, in the mold of much of the Golden Age poetry. And some were eulogies for Zion to which he felt a very strong connection. There's a legend that he was killed in front of the Western Wall, bending down singing one of his eulogies for Zion.

Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi also wrote religious liturgy, songs that are used at various points of services in synagogues of every community. The RIHaL arranged the *kedusha* of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur that is used by various Sephardic communities. He also wrote Shabbat songs, including "Yom Shabbaton" and "Al Ahavatcha."

As he matured, HaLevi began to question the superficialities of court life and the fatuous youth he had spent. He questioned the "truths" of philosophy in his book *The Kuzari* (1130s) and decided to leave Spain in 1140 at the height of his career, after his wife passed. His journey eastward became the occasion for a marvelous series of poems about the sea. After a sojourn in Egypt, where he resumed his life as a courtier, HaLevi embarked upon his final journey to the Land of Israel, fulfilling a dream that he had written about so poetically for decades. He died soon after his arrival in the Land of Israel.

Questions for Discussion

1. Read these famous poems by Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi in class and answer the questions that follow.

My Heart is in the East

לבי במזרח

*My heart is in the East, and I in the depths of the West.
My food has no taste. How can it be sweet?*

לבי במזרח ואנכי בסוף מערב
אין אטעמה את אשר אכל ואין יערב

*How can I fulfill my pledges and my vows?
When Zion is in the power of Edom, and I in the fetters of
Arabia?*

איכה אשלם נדרי ואקרי, בעוד
ציון בחבל אדום ואני בכבל ערב

*It will be nothing to me to leave all the goodness of Spain.
So rich will it be to see the dust of the ruined sanctuary.*

יקל בעיני עזב כל טוב ספרד, כמו
יקר בעיני ראות עפרות דביר נחרב.

- What feelings are expressed in this poem?
- Where is the poet? Where does he want to be?
- Who are Edom and Ishmael (Arabia)? How do they reflect the political reality of Spain in HaLevi's day?
- Does the poem explain how HaLevi could leave his family in Spain to go to Eretz Yisrael?
- Do you think this famous and rich courtier is sincere?

Tsion ha-Lo Tishali – Ode to Zion

ציון, הלא תשאלי

*O Zion, will you not ask how your captives are-
Those who seek your welfare, who are the remnant of your
flocks?*

ציון, הלא תשאלי לשלום אסיריך,
דורשי שלומך והם יתר עדריך?

*From west and east, north and south,
accept the greetings of those near and far, from every side,
and the blessings of this captive of desire,
who sheds tears like the dew of Hermon
And longs to have them fall upon your hills.*

מיים ומזרח ומצפון ותימן שלום
רחוק וקרוב שאי מכל עברריך,
ושלום אסיר תאווה, נותן דמעיו כטל-
חרמון ונכסף לרדתם על הרריך!
לבבות ענותך אני תנים, ועת אחלם
שיבת שבותך – אני כנור לשירריך.

*I am like a jackal when I weep for your affliction;
But when I dream of your exiles' return,
I am a lute for your songs.*

- What is the theme of the poem?
- To whom does the poet compare himself?
- Do you know any song using the same metaphor ("Yerushalayim shel Zahav," by Naomi Shemer)?
- Why is HaLevi known as the "sweet singer of Zion"?
- What are sources that he may have used for which to base his poetry?

2. Poetry analysis: use a collection of Yehuda HaLevi's poems.

- What are sources that he may have used for which to base his poetry?
 - Review liturgic and TaNaKh sources that may have inspired him.
 - Using the materials collected, create an artistic expression of the Jewish love for the land of Israel via song, poetry, visual art, movement, digital art, etc.
3. If you had to write a letter explaining Judaism and Jewish beliefs to a non-Jew, what are the top 10 things that you would present?
- a. Do a search through the Kuzari <https://www.sefaria.org/Kuzari> for keywords that you presented. Did any of them match up?
 - b. In small groups choose one of the essays to read and present to the rest of the class.

Suggested Readings

Brann, Ross, *The Compunctious Poet*, (Baltimore, 1991).

Gerber, Jane, *The Jews of Spain*, (New York, 1993), chapter 3.

Scheindlin, Raymond, *Wine, women and Death, Medieval Hebrew Poems on the Good Life*, (Philadelphia, 1986).

Spiegel, Shalom, "On Medieval Hebrew Poetry" in Goldin, Judah ed., *The Jewish Expression* (New York, 1970), pp. 174-216.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/halevi/#OriJewRelTheSin>

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