

NORMAN LAMM  
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THE JEWISH CENTER  
ADULT ED. PROGRAM

Fall Supper Lecture Series

"YEHUDAH HALEVI"

1. HIS LIFE AND POETRY

True and pure, and without blemish  
Was his singing, like his soul --  
The Creator having made it  
With His handiwork contented,  
Kissed the lovely soul, and echoes  
Of that kiss fore ever after  
Thrilled through all the poet's numbers,  
By that gracious deed inspired

In these words did Heinrich Heine, the German poet, sing the praises of the most eminent poet ever to write in the Holy Language -- or in any other language. That Divine Kiss left its G-dly imprint on Yehudah Halevi's life, his poetry, his philosophy. To this day, over 800 years later, Halevi shines forth as one of the purest souls and most sublime poets of all times. Rabbi Yehudah Halevi is, in the estimate of most students of Judaism, the most authentic Jew of the ages. To know Yehudah Halevi is, in a sense, to know what a Jew is and should be. When we study Halevi, as we shall do in this series, and ponder the sweetness of his personality, the grace of his poetry and the charm of his Jewish thought, we are really discovering for ourselves the ideal personality of Judaism.

Two great centers of Jewish life and thought flourished during the Middle Ages -- the Franco-German center, and that of the Iberian Peninsula, Spain and Portugal. The Franco-German communities produced the most potent development of Talmudic scholarship -- Rashi and the Tosaphists. Its Talmudic learning was far more intense than that of Spanish Jewry. The Spaniards, on the other hand, were generally less intense as Talmudists, but more inclined to general culture. Spanish Jewry too had its Talmudic giants: Maimonides, Nachmanides, and a host of others. But the Sephardim, unlike the Ashekenazim, were culturally more versatile.



- included: science, poetry, medicine, grammar, philosophy.
- Franco-Germans reflected feudalism their environment - hemmed in; Spaniards - comparative freedom - both political and cultural - of theirs.
- yet all not well time YHL born. Contemporary Moslems, Christians murdering each other in Palestine, Iberia, N.Africa
- Spain itself torn between Islam, controlling South, & Christianity, controlling Northern States.
- Geographically, Spain torn between North and South; philosophically & culturally: between EAST (Islam, fate, man part of universe) and WEST (Greeks, freedom, man measure of all things - REASON)
- In time this sort, with its tensions, yet comparative tranquility, the great tragedies Spanish Jewry yet to come, that Jews Iberia thrived, produced great GOLDEN AGE. Rest world: DARK AGES. We: GOLDEN AGES.
- Golden Age: had produced numerous luminaries. First giant: IBN GABIROL. Died very young. Genius in poetry, sad and melancholy. Great thinker.
- towards end Golden Age, a whole group of literary and spiritual giants. Two contemporaries (little older) of YHL were: ABRAHAM IBN EZRA (known from commentary Chumash) and MOSES IBN EZRA (Browning poem). Brothers? Don't know - anyway, related. Both friends of YHL.
- Into this society was born YHL, the "AVI HA-MESHORERIM", the Father of Poets. Uncertain exact year: three opinions: 1075, 1080, 1085.
- YHL stands as symbol of greatness Spanish Jewry. His life - a pious legend. Exemplifies his age as surely as Shakespeare does Elizabethan England.
- YHL had three great loves - - and his life-story is basically story of how he developed and expressed these passionate loves: LOVE OF G-D; LOVE OF PEOPLE OF ISRAEL; LOVE OF LAND OF ISRAEL.
- in YHL, the individual person and the collective character of our whole people become interchangeable. Only such person could write:

לְבָבוֹת עֲנוּתָךְ אֲנִי תָנִים  
וְעַתָּה אֶחָלוּם / שִׁיבָה שְׂבוּתָךְ  
אֲנִי כְנֹר לְשִׁירֶיךָ

"To wail for thine affliction I am like the jackals; but when I dream  
"Of the return of thy captivity, I am a harp for thy songs."

He acted in both capacities: jackal and harp....  
Merged life and will with that of Israel, so that most sensitive scholars regard him as even more authentically Jewish than Rambam....



BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:

1. YHL born NORTH SPAIN (Christian), lived there mostly. Place birth: TOLEDO in Castille - date mentioned, about 50 years before Maimonides

Castille then under King Alfonso VI. Was formerly under Moslem rule. King very liberal, good to Jews - so much, that was castigated for it by Pope Gregory VII.

Previously, Jews had fled from CHRISTIAN NORTH to MOSLEM SOUTH, experienced there most of GOLDEN AGE. Now ALMOHADES dominate in South (later to cause Maimonides great sorrow, exile), cause Jews to reverse, flee as refugees to Christian NORTH. Even joined Northern Christian armies to battle Almohades. But whenever Christians lost -- blamed Jews! Result: pogroms, leader of Toledo Spanish Jewry killed.

Caught between CROSS AND CRESCENT, Jews YHL's times in classically tragic Jewish predicament... YHL -- this time as a jackal wailing for Zion's affliction -- cried out:

A curse on Edom and Kedar;  
Whichever conquers or is conquered,  
Always woe is with my people.

2. As youngster - certainly no ascetic, though serious. Sense of humor which lasted throughout life. Example:

I spied a white hair lurking in my beard,  
And straightway plucked it thence. "Thou'rt brave," it sneered,  
"Gainst a lone scout - quite brave. But wilt thou be  
As plucky when my troop comes, seeking me?"

Yet intellectually highly curious, excellent mind. After leaving parents' home - first to famous school Lucerna, under Talmudist R. Isaac Alfasi. Friend: R. Joseph Ibn Migash (teacher father of Maimonides). In addition to Talmudic studies, wrote poems many occasions. We have for: death of Alfasi, marriage Migash.

3. Whilst still very young, become youngest member one of most sparkling circles of the age - thinkers, poets. There first met MOSES IBN EZRA who, after reading first batch YHL's work, called him "the pearl diver and lord of the most rare jewels and brilliance in song." Wrote:

How can a boy so young in years  
Bear such a weight of wisdom sage,  
Nor 'mongst the greybeards find his peers  
While still in the very bloom of age?

This was a strange friendship - terrific contrast. MIE came to G-d thru unrequited love of neice whom he could not marry; YHL - from mature, happy, balanced experiences.

4. YHL's personality was winning - captivating. Universally loved. Friend, a DAYAN, R. Yosef Ibn Zaddik, said that YHL "combined the strength of a lion with the gentleness of a gazelle."



5. Wanderlust, intellectual restlessness, also insecurity drove him from city to city, school to school. During this time: MASTERED SEVERAL LANGUAGES, DIALECTS, LEARNED TALMUD, SCIENCE, MEDICINE. EARNED LIVING BY FLOURISHING MEDICAL PRACTICE.

6. So: paid attention both to intellectual disciplines and artistic, poetic pursuits. Loved to sing, needed to think. Felt some kind contradiction, understood that study - "Wisdom" - must come first. Wrote:

Wisdom is like the mighty sea,  
Song but the foam on its surface.

Yet essentially reconciled them. HIS POETRY AND HIS PHILOSOPHY REINFORCE EACH OTHER. HIS SONGS MAKE YOU THINK. HIS THOUGHTS SING.

We shall be looking today for some of the ideational content of his poems. Next two lectures you will discover all by yourselves the romantic, poetic nature of his ideas as expressed in his immortal philosophical book, THE KUZARI.

7. Wanderlust left him temporarily about 1120 when married happily in Seville, and became father of only child, a beautiful daughter. LEGEND: his father-in-law was ABRAHAM IBN EZRA -- the sad, bitter, pessimistic poet with the melancholy humor who regarded himself as a classical "shlimazel", wrote that if he would sell candles, sun would never set; if he'd sell shrouds, no one would ever die. (Story why YHL has ISN - 1120 1121)

8. Ten years later - back to Toledo. Big medical practice, but restless, something disturbing him, inner dissatisfaction with bourgeois security feelings Toledo's Jews. In Islamic Cordova finds general depression from suffering. Everywhere greeted by large, loving, enthusiastic crowds.

9. His wife dies, deeply grieves. Decides: only one great ambition could keep life meaningful -- pilgrimage to Holy Land. (SPEAK OF YHL AS THE GREAT POET OF ZIONISM -- FIRST RELIGIOUS ZIONIST \*\* TRUE NATIONAL BARD OF ISRAEL...) . Travel to Palestine then: long, perilous. Israel itself: barren, treacherous, poor..... Many friends try discourage him. MOSES IBN EZ

The joy of my countenance has fled with his departure,  
After being seven-fold lit up by his presence.  
The lights of my time have become dark because of account of him  
So that the morning appears to me dismal and black.  
Our hearts were like one; but alas! he is gone, and  
My heart is divided into two

YHL boarded his small ship after relinquishing all the comforts and friends and financial security of his GALUT home. The sea journey was a moving experience. Later will read one or two of the many poems written whilst standing at the railing of the storm-tossed boat. He deeply missed his beloved daughter, even more: her son, whom she named Yehudah after her father. "Ah," he writes, "how should Yehudah forget Yehudah?"

10. His sea voyage ends in Egypt. Warmly welcomed, plead with him to stay. Parting difficult, later read verses expressing determination to continue. Closer he came to goal, more fervent his longing.... Did he ever get there? Here history stops and legend takes over: Trampled Arab horseman whilst singing his ODE TO ZION (TZION HALO TISHALI) at gates Jerusalem.

re. Talmud: when messiah broke into Jerusalem to pick up pieces - for was made of very precious material. what happened? Poor found only small pieces, rich - big pieces. Here poor found the "AF" ("not") fragments - rich: Nisan, Vaisak, Ziv... Poor forgotten... Rich (YHL - way as everything)



11. Unlikely he did not leave Egypt - his poems are insistent on that - and probably very much truth in legend. BUT - did have premonition of death. In last poem he wrote, he pleads with his friends that, if they desire to please him, they should send him off on his journey to his G-d, for he can find no peace until he makes G-d's home - Palestine - his own home.

אל פעמי האחרון פנסוע / כי אפחד פן יקרני אסוני

"Do not keep my footsteps from journeying, for I fear lest my tragedy come."

12. His mystery-shrouded death took place about 1140. One legend says he is buried in Damascus. Another, recorded by Abraham Zacuto, the friend of Christopher Columbus and author of SEFER HA#YUCHASIN, puts his grave in Safed. Why was no elegy composed in his honor? Dr. Simon Bernstein suggests that he was too great to eulogize in verse - just as no eulogy for Moses or Isaiah or Amos. Only a YHL could be great enough to write such an elegy. And YHL was dead.

### \*HIS POETRY....

(mention exhibition of his books outside)

1. Extremely POPULAR. His liturgical poems officially recited before ink dry.
2. Most responsible for BIBLICAL RENNAISSANCE his day, no less <sup>important</sup> than Dante's ~~for~~ Italian Renaissance 150 years later. BIBLICAL VERSES interlarded every poem. Biblical spirit, quest and yearning for G-d, simple expression of sublime love. Gave ordinary Jews new pride as "the Chosen of G-d" and the "heart of the nations of the world." His use of Biblical verses, fragments and paraphrases make translation difficult. (John Ciardi, recent issue of Saturday Review, says: every translation is a failure.)
3. Poetry should have poetic FORM and poetic FORCE. YHL had both. FORME will become evident. Form:

\*\*superb use RHYME, & especially METER.

READ - Heb. only first-~~para~~ stanza #70 (p.127)

\*\*aliterations - (also play-on-words):

מבחר נזרים למבחר פנזרים / ושיר השירים לשיר השירים

OK: כשושנים הנזרים בין הדודרים

4. Altogether - ABOUT ONE THOUSAND POEMS

5. Many DIVISIONS YHL poetry. We: BIOGRAPHICAL; ZION (שירי גאולה); LOVE & BRIDAL (שירי חול); and DEVOTIONAL (שירי קודש).

\*\*mention some of sources, esp. Nina Salaman's transl. for J.P.S.

### \*BIOGRAPHICAL POEMS....

(\*asterik indicates transl.in auxilliary text)

1. \*I-D, p. 2 (Eng. only)
2. #15 (p. 29) (ENG. only)
3. # 6 (pp. 14 ff.)
4. # 22 (pp. 39 ff.)



\*ZION SONGS....

To YHL, the Return to Zion is not essentially a political goal, though its physical restitution is integral part his plan, dream...

Primarily: religious:

His Zionism is not theoretical, like Americans, just as it is not secular (BG) He demands immediate Aliyah, work on the beloved Holy Land.

Shame of Galut...

"Iniquity of Youth" - what youthful sin is he bemoaning? Answer: not having come earlier to Holy Land

1. HEB: #1 (p.2); \*ENG: I-A, p.1.
2. HEB: #2 (p.3); \*ENG: I-B, p.1. HEB. p.7; ENG: p.7
3. HEB. #4 (p.9); \*ENG: I-C, p.2 (OMIT IF NO TIME)

\*LOVE AND BRIDAL SONGS....

In later life YHL thought little of these youthful diversions, even regretted writing them. Yet there is holiness even in these "secular" poems! The Hebrew poet CHARIZI said that YHL's love poems are "made of dew and fire"

READ (ENG. ONLY) 0-- \*ENG: I-D<sup>E</sup>, p.2.

\*DEVOTIONAL POEMS.....

(Mention Michael; mention some of YHL's poems we recite in Synagogue, as ציון הלא תשאלני on TISHA B'AV; יום ליבשה נהפכו on PASSOVER; יום השביעי at our Sabbath Seudah)

1. HEB: #58 (p.113); \*ENG: I-F, p.3 (shows YHL G-d-intoxicated in all things)
2. HEB: AND ENG. : # 43 (pp. 87 ff.) (OMIT IF NO TIME)
3. HEB: # 73 (pp. 134 ff.); \*ENG: I-G, p.3.

CONCLUSION

Next two lectures will turn to the poetry-in-philosophy, even as today tried to discover the -philosophy-in-poetry of YHL.

Translation very poor second best. Yet hope you got at least inkling of poet who, in Hebrew, one of simplest yet sublimest, an alchemist of words who can extract from them their purest essence and with them, as with some magic potion, transmute ordinary men and women from prosaic platitudes to become wonder-struck souls soaring to the heavens....

I do not believe there ever was another poet like YHL -- and we have had some great ones. CHARIZI - that all of YHL's works, even his love-poems, were "drawn from the Holy Sprit", from RUACH HA-KODESH.

Even more strikingly, CHARIZI says Of YHL that he is one who "broke into the treasure-house of song," and who, going out again, "shut the gate behind him." Through his poems we have been privileged to catch a glance at the luminous treasures. Whenever the heart is parched, we ought to return to him.