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Toward a New Understanding of Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*

Michael S. Berger / Bronx, New York

Judah Halevi, a noted poet, philosopher, and physician of medieval Spanish Jewry, continues to be of both scholarly and lay interest. His poetry, included in the liturgy of several Jewish communities, still inspires readers in its simplicity and emotional force. His theological masterpiece, the *Kuzari*, composed in 1140, possibly shares the distinction (along with Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, written roughly fifty years later) of being the most widely read and influential work in medieval Jewish thought. Set in the legendary land of the Khazars, the King, on a spiritual quest, learns about Judaism from a Rabbi, and the dialogue between them constitutes the bulk of the book. In the *Kuzari*'s literary setting of a dialogue, Halevi mounts a defense of Judaism's practices and beliefs that is read and studied by many even today. And since the author himself made a dramatic move to the land of Israel at the end of his life, Halevi speaks to modern Jews who relate to the reborn state of Israel.

In contrast to the evident organization and rigorous argumentation of Maimonides' *Guide*, however, Halevi's *Kuzari* confronts the reader as a disjointed work, composed of five parts, each with a seemingly meandering series of discussions and arguments. As Julius Guttman points out, the dialogue "passes from topic to topic simply in an uncrafted, disconnected manner."¹ Themes are addressed, temporarily tabled, and then taken up again later, sometimes within a different book. Throughout the discussion between the King of the Khazars and the Rabbi, tangents are often pursued as the interest of the discussants alters or shifts emphasis. The line of thought appears to follow a stream of consciousness rather than a deliberate direction.

This apparently free-flowing style has also allowed interpretations of the *Kuzari* to proliferate.² Indeed, the *Kuzari* has been understood along a

¹ J. Guttman, "Ha-yachas bein ha-dat u-vein ha-pilosofia lefi Yehudah ha-levi," in his *Dat u-Mada* (Jerusalem, 1955), p. 66. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

² As might be expected, differences in the Hebrew translations of the *Kuzari* are also detected.
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broad spectrum of interpretations: Isaac Husik saw it as an antirationalist treatise; Leo Strauss, as a grounding of reason on faith; Eliezer Schweid, as a polemic defending the Jewish religion (as the subtitle seems to imply); Ben-Zion Dinur, as a unique form of Jewish eschatology; and, at the other extreme, David Neumark, as a typical medieval work on the attributes of God.³ All these scholars appeal to Halevi's motive in writing the *Kuzari* in developing their theses.⁴ Given a postulated overall aim to the book, each scholar then accentuates certain passages while playing down, if not totally ignoring, others. Halevi's apparent lack of clear emphasis has unfortunately only resulted in a variety of claims as to what his point really is.

In a sense, however, all the interpreters of the *Kuzari* essentially agree with Guttman's assessment of the hodgepodge nature of the work. For although each cites various passages of the work as evidence, little attention is paid to the overall structure of the book. Sections from part 1 may be cited side by side with passages from book 3 or 5 to present a coherent case for the *Kuzari*'s major theme. With such selective quotation, it is little wonder that disparate, even contradictory, accounts of the work's nature have been offered.

THE FIVE BOOKS OF THE KUZARI

To be sure, not all interpretations have treated every section of the *Kuzari* as having equal weight in determining the point of the work. Some give certain parts of the book increased significance. For example, over thirty years ago, several manuscripts and fragments recovered from the Cairo Geniza were discerned to be those of Judah Halevi, and one referred to the *Kuzari* itself. According to that fragment, Halevi explains to his Egyptian friend Halfon that he wrote a small piece to answer the challenges

able. Interpretation and translation are inextricably bound. See Hanah Amit-Kokhavi, "Hebeitim aḥadim shel shnei targumim le-ḳeta mitokh sefer 'ha-Kuzari' le-rabi Yehudah ha-Levi" (The unique perspectives of two translations of a section from Rabbi Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*), in *Lyunim be-valshanut uve-semiyotikah*, ed. Lorens Deyis, Elyakim Vainberg, and Avraham Solomonik (Jerusalem: Mišrad ha-Hinukh vecha-Tarbut, 1981), pp. 97–110.

³ See Isaac Husik, *A History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946); Isaak Heinemann, "Judah Halevi: *Kuzari*," *Three Jewish Philosophers*, ed. Isaak Heinemann (New York: Atheneum, 1972); and Julius Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism*, trans. David W. Silverman (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964); Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1952); Eliezer Schweid, *Ta'am ve-hakashah* (Ramat Gan, 1970), pp. 37–79; Ben-Zion Dinur, "'Aliyato shel Rabi Yehudah ha-Levi le-Erez Yisrael," in his *Minhah le-David* (Jerusalem, 1935); and David Neumark, *Essays in Jewish Philosophy* (Cincinnati: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1929).

⁴ I have chosen to focus only on the scholarly analyses of the book's major themes. Within religious circles, the *Kuzari* has been taken as everything from a profound philosophical work to a mystical text of the Kabbalah (owing to the fourth book's treatment of such matters).

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posed by a Karaite philosopher, and the result was “only a trifle.”⁵ D. Z. Baneth and Shlomo Dov Goitein have pointed out that most likely there was a first draft of the *Kuzari*, much smaller in size, which was intended as a response to the Karaite’s challenge.⁶ It was this short polemic that Halevi called “a trifle,” which is why he neglected to send a copy to his friend Halfon. According to these scholars, it was this defense that served as the skeleton for the first four books of the *Kuzari*, which followed the accepted pattern of Jewish theology, namely, that of Neoplatonic thought, adapted to defend monotheistic faiths. Later, on the assumed encouragement of friends, Halevi added the fifth book, which tackles the then-emerging Aristotelianism, a philosophical movement that had gained currency among Spanish intellectuals. He then revised and fleshed out the first four into their present, completed form.

The distinction of the fifth book as a later addition to the *Kuzari* is evident in its style, as well. Whereas dialogue is the dominant form of the first four books, the fifth book is almost monologic, beginning with the simple, unprompted request of the King to learn more about Aristotelian and Kalam philosophy in an effort to dispel his ignorance.⁷ This does not seem to be motivated by anything the Rabbi said earlier or by something that had bothered the King. In that sense, the subject is disjointed with respect to the earlier sections. After the initial request, there follow several long accounts by the Rabbi of the claims of these philosophies and their weaknesses and inconsistencies, if not outright refutation of their arguments. Two of the longest passages of the work are in this book, both continuing for several pages.⁸ Therefore, both in terms of style and content, book 5 is unique and, perhaps, even out of place. Baneth’s and Goitein’s assumption is apparently justified.

More recently, scholars have sought internal evidence for this notion of a “composite” *Kuzari* and developed it further.⁹ Against Baneth and

⁵ S. D. Goitein, “Mikhtevei Rabi Yehudah ha-levi mitokh ha-Genizah,” *Tarbiz* 25 (1956): 393–412.

⁶ D. Z. Baneth, “Le-otografim shel Yehudah ha-levi ule-hithavuth sefer ha-Kuzari,” *Tarbiz* 26 (1957): 297–303; S. D. Goitein, “The Biography of Rabbi Judah Ha-levi in the Light of the Cairo Geniza Documents,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 28 (1959): 41–56.

⁷ Judah Halevi, *Sefer ha-Kuzari* (1140), trans., annotated, and introduced by Yehudah Even Shmuel (Jerusalem: Dvir, 1972), bk. 5, sec. 1. Further references to the *Kuzari* will be by book and section numbers.

⁸ *Ibid.*, secs. 12 and 20. In the Even Shmuel edition of the *Kuzari*, the king’s comments in secs. 11 and 21 are added in order to interrupt even larger sections because of a change in content. See the editor’s notes in the back of the book, pp. 297 and 306. Without these insertions, the passages are even longer.

⁹ Eliezer Schweid treats this subject directly in his doctoral dissertation, published as “Habikoret ‘al ha-aristoteliyut bi-mei ha-banaiyim” (Hebrew University, 1962), pt. 1, pp. 17–96, and is condensed in his *Toldot ha-pilosofia ha-yehudit* (Jerusalem: Academon, 1968), pp. 122–77. This last book is actually a collection of Schweid’s lecture notes compiled by students.

Goitein, Schweid has suggested that only the third book was the original response to the Karaite, given its particular focus on Karaism (the presumed original target of the polemic) as well as its unique style of Platonic dialogue. This short work was broadened to constitute a larger polemic defending the truth of the Jewish religion against *all* challengers. The insertion of the third book was artificial, and Schweid detects rather obvious literary devices added to the end of the second book and the beginning of the fourth to try to hide the glaring seams in the new enlarged text.

Yochanan Silman takes this idea a step further, positing an “early” and “later” thought of Halevi to account for discrepant sections within the *Kuzari*.¹⁰ The earlier ideas make up the original third book as well as sections of the first and second books, which have similar arguments, and the rest of the work constitutes the later thought. While Schweid’s thesis explains the disparity of the third book, Silman’s account is developmental, claiming that Halevi underwent a “conversion” from a modified Aristotelianism to a total rejection of that philosophy for a historical-experiential approach to (revealed) religion. Silman assumes that rather than discard the earlier work, Halevi subtly incorporated it into the newer product, not just to indicate the outlines of an autobiographical odyssey but to express his view that every Jew must go through a period of reliance on philosophy to help understand his or her own Judaism, only to be liberated from that view in a more mature and self-confident perspective of human and historical experience. Halevi wants the reader to see the tension—in his case, personal but actually prototypical—between the two views and to follow a similar evolution from the “early” thought to the “later” view. He therefore crafted a unity that emerged from disunity, which Silman finds in apparent contradictions between various arguments in the work as a whole.

Goitein and Baneth maintain that the first four books constituted the original work, while Schweid and Silman thought that the earlier work was more limited (comprising only the third book and possibly scattered fragments in the other books), but all reject the notion that the revised *Kuzari* retained its original and exclusive anti-Karaite aim. For Goitein and Baneth, as well as for Silman and Schweid, the impetus to return to the work and amend it was to respond to Aristotelianism, but in very different ways. According to the Goitein and Baneth, Halevi took the anti-Karaite polemic (running from bk. 1 to bk. 4) and tacked on a fifth book to treat Aristotelianism directly. Thus, there are really two purposes in the pages of the revised work. Schweid essentially agrees, but he sees the orig-

¹⁰ Yochanan Silman, *Bein Pilosof le-navi* (Bar Ilan, 1985).

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inal work as more circumscribed, limited to book 3 only. The response to Aristotelianism coaxed Halevi to turn a small “pamphlet” into a larger apologetic work against all who sought to disparage Judaism, particularly Aristotelian philosophy. Silman, in an original position, sees more than anti-Karaite motivation in the original work, which as in Schweid’s view, is more limited. Rather, it is a product of an earlier period in Halevi’s life during which Aristotelian philosophy did help him understand his Judaism, and it reflects a defense of Judaism that incorporates many Aristotelian themes. However, as Halevi matured, he rejected that earlier view and came to see religious experience and the historical element as the source of true spirituality (the aim of bks. 1–2 and 4–5), as opposed to a sterile and intellectual metaphysics. Halevi forged a new, larger work that plots the same intellectual odyssey for the reader—namely, beginning with philosophy, but ultimately rejecting it.

Both Silman and Schweid also try to explain the unique literary device chosen by Halevi in light of his project. For Schweid (as for other interpreters), the King is *not* a philosopher, and Halevi deliberately chose him to undermine the self-delegated authority of the new challenger, Aristotelianism. To get a totally impartial judge, Halevi is not satisfied with one who is neither Christian nor Muslim. Philosophy itself is biased and can therefore not serve as an umpire to this debate. On the contrary, it itself is a candidate and is the first to be shown *inadequate* in meeting the needs of the King in his quest for the proper form of action. Philosophy is not wrong; it is merely unhelpful in the religious quest of the average person. Schweid goes on to explain the threads of the argument, as they continue principally through books 1, 2, 4, and 5, outlining the odyssey of one who is convinced of the truth of Judaism, who then proceeds to inquire about the details of God and Judaism (bk. 2) on the road to the climax of religious experience, that is, prophecy (bk. 4).¹¹ With that, the King’s education is complete. The fifth book is simply the final chapter enabling the King, whose skills at ratiocination have now been sharpened, to confront Aristotelianism, which then dominated the intellectual classes, directly before he embarks on his personal route to religious fulfillment.

Silman also sees this emphasis on religious experience versus intellectual philosophy as justification for the literary setting. Even the choice of the dialogic form is intended to highlight the development of the King’s powers of reasoning, an education required to see ultimately the inadequacies of Aristotelianism.

Schweid’s account claims that the third book stands out in its patent intrusion into the *Kuzari*’s main thrust, which is contained in the first two

¹¹ Schweid, *Ta’am ve-hakashah*, pp. 46–48.

and last two books. However, he does not adequately explain, as Silman does, why Halevi felt compelled to include the third book (the prior response to the Karaites), particularly if it interrupted a neatly constructed work. If Karaism was another challenger, then perhaps Halevi should have included a Karaite in the early array of candidates. But such a theory suffers if we but pause to consider the author. Judah Halevi, the premier Andalusian poet, whose poetry's elegance and smooth style are exemplary even today, surely could have crafted a neater, more fluid work of philosophy. Halevi was at least capable of crafting a smoother transition, or finding a better place (most likely bk. 1) in which to discuss Karaism, rather than keeping it an independent and evidently distinct piece. To claim that such a writer left glaring seams in his philosophic work is to underestimate the proven talent of an expert author. And if, as Silman suggests, Halevi wanted the readers to see the route one takes from reliance on philosophy to its rejection, once again a talented craftsman such as Halevi would not have simply "pasted" two portions together or allowed the central theme to remain so cryptic, particularly if the original "prophilosophy" view was expressed in the third rather than the first book.

One major facet of the *Kuzari* that none of the aforementioned scholars attempts to explain is the rather arbitrary division of the work. While I agree with Schweid and Silman that style is as important a clue in deciphering a work as content, the two apparently fail to account for the *structure* of the *Kuzari*, which is as significant a stylistic element as any, if not more so. To be sure, both claim the third book was an independent entity from an earlier draft, and Schweid details the flow of the arguments in book 1 so that they cohere as a whole, concluding rather overtly with the King's decision to convert (of which we're told only at the beginning of bk. 2). Nevertheless, why books 2 and 4 end where they do remains unexplained, as well as the very necessity for structuring the work as Halevi did. On Schweid's account, a lengthy work, with similarly "glaring seams," could have been written with little lost. Methodologically, it seems more appropriate to account for this division and its relevance to the content of the arguments than to view it merely as a given.

It is hard to agree with Goitein and Baneth that the original work was four books in length, for then Halevi would not have considered it a trifle, unless this was a modest excuse for his neglecting to send a copy to a friend, a technique common among Arab authors. It is more likely, as Schweid and Silman accept, that the third book, dubbed a "trifle," was the original piece written by Halevi. However, given that the fifth book seems to stand apart stylistically (in its nondialogic form) and appears to be a later addition, I would like to suggest that Halevi had enlarged a Karaite polemic into the first *four* books (hardly a trifle). I propose a unitary view

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of the *Kuzari* that does indeed flow from the rationale for the work. But that motive does not center on the debate between philosophy and revelation. A response to Aristotelianism was not the only need emerging in mid- to late twelfth-century Spain, and this may provide a clue to a new reading of the *Kuzari* that incorporates the contributions of these recent scholars, while offering a broader context in which to see them.

A GOLDEN AGE IN DECLINE

Gerson Cohen has commented on this state of affairs, referring to Halevi indirectly.¹² In his discussion of the purpose of Abraham Ibn Daud's *Book of Tradition* (1160–61), a work that begins with Adam and traces the direct lineage down to the Jewish leaders of Spain, Cohen claims that Judah Halevi was actually the impetus for this book. Jewish life in Spain had experienced a golden age, with Jews involved in virtually all aspects of Muslim culture, even achieving unprecedented heights in political influence. The self-perceived superiority of Spanish Jews led them to trace their lineage to Davidic royalty and even to develop a messianism centered on Spain. The centerpieces of the high Jewish culture were poetry and philosophy, as they were in the general Moorish society. However, the political and social setbacks of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries threatened the Jewish feelings of security. Berber invaders could wipe out entire Jewish communities, and Spanish mobs could be incited to attack their Jewish neighbors.

Judah Halevi was the typically adjusted Andalusian Jew of this period. He was acknowledged far and wide as the preeminent Jewish poet in both secular and religious Hebrew verse. Through his poetry, however, we see that this pillar of the Spanish Jewish elite began to be disillusioned in the 1130s, on the heels of a failed messianic movement and confronting a deteriorating political climate.¹³ The poet who once composed verse on love, wine parties, and virtually every object available to the senses increasingly turned to writing poems that expressed the plight of his people in exile.

The Jews' political situation at the time contributed to Halevi's growing

¹² See Cohen's comments in *The Book of Tradition by Abraham Ibn Daud*, trans. Gerson D. Cohen (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967), p. 295.

¹³ Norman A. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), p. 60. Dinburg argues the case of Halevi's messianism quite convincingly in *Minhah le-David* (n. 3 above), p. 167. For an example of this disillusionment in his poetry, here is one excerpt: "God, for those who await You / and for me, open Your hand to offer / Them this day they request, / my brethren who are in the grip of poverty. / For redeemers have failed / to deliver my salvation" (from Judah Halevi, *Divan des Abul-Hasan Jehudah ha-Levi*, ed. H. Brody [Berlin, 1894], vol. 3, no. 12, verses 1–3).

despair and disappointment. After centuries of a Golden Age, the Jews' position seemed on the verge of total collapse. Halevi's resentment of the enemy was rivaled only by his bitterness toward the Jews who refused to acknowledge the changing climate. Not only was social intolerance increasing, but Jewish culture itself was experiencing widespread religious skepticism. At the height of his creative output, Halevi renounced it all—family, wealth, and friends—and decided to move to Zion. What he rejected was not merely the Spanish home of the Jew but also the entire Jewish way of life in Spain, particularly that of the intellectual and political elite, the very circles in which he traveled.¹⁴ The apparent antirationalist thrust of the work is seen by Cohen as a condemnation of the Jewish acceptance of philosophy as the sole standard of religious truth. As Cohen points out, Ibn Daud aimed to restore Spanish Jewry's faith in the prominence and even messianism of its Jewish elite and to reassure the people of their confidence in rationalism, faiths that Halevi had shaken to their foundations with his decision to leave Spain.

In light of Cohen's thesis, there are several elements in the *Kuzari* that clearly identify the Rabbi with Halevi himself. The most obvious is the Rabbi's decision, at the end of the work, to move to Israel. This epilogue is not an afterthought to the *Kuzari*. The epilogue (*hatimath ha-sefer*) provides a critical endpoint to the trajectory of the entire work. It is crafted to highlight the position taken by the Rabbi, one into which the King forced him earlier in book 2, distinguished by its emotional tone.

The discursive rhythm of question-answer or comment-elaboration is maintained consistently throughout the first four books and is rarely broken. Although the responses of the Rabbi may vary in length, he is clearly responding to a query of the King or expounding on a subject he only mentioned in passing earlier. However, in two places, the Rabbi deviates from this scholarly rhetoric and lapses into emotional self-rebuke. After the Rabbi finishes a long monologue praising the land of Israel, the King has enough courage to rebuke his teacher rather abrasively: "If this is so, you are lax in your religious duty by not endeavoring to reach that place and making it your permanent home in life and in death. . . . Thus your bowing in its direction is either hypocrisy or thoughtless practice."¹⁵ The Rabbi can respond in only one way to the King's excoriation: "You have found the spot of my embarrassment, O King of the Khazars!"¹⁶ The Rabbi then proceeds to admit to this failing in remorseful terms, citing

¹⁴ Cohen, pp. 296–97. In Halevi's own words (translated by Cohen at p. 298): "The grandeur of Islam, the glory of Greece / are vanity beside the Urim and Tummim. / Zion's anointed, its Levites and princes / Cannot be replaced for they are unique."

¹⁵ Book 2, sec. 23.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, sec. 24.

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verses that refer to this weakness in the Jewish people.¹⁷ Given the people's unwillingness to return to the Promised Land, it is no wonder, claims the Rabbi, that the Jews remain downtrodden and unredeemed in the Diaspora. In this case, admits the Rabbi cynically, the prayers that Jews recite about returning to the Land truly sound like "the talk of a parrot and the chirping of the starling."¹⁸ Such remorse and cynicism, distinguished stylistically from the rest of the text, is the clear speech of a Halevi who had decided to leave the complacent Spanish Jewry and settle in Palestine.

On only one other occasion does the Rabbi have a similar emotional confession, and his response to the King's astute observation parallels an earlier exclamation. Toward the end of book 1, the King is told by the Rabbi of the benefits of the subservient status of Jews in the Exile, that while Christians and Muslims revel in their ascension to power and glory, the Jews are better off, being closer to God than they would have been had they been in power. The King, noticing immediately the discrepancy between the Rabbi's account and the reality of Jewish behavior, comments: "This would indeed be true, if your lowly state had been freely chosen. But it is forced upon you, and when you will be in power, you too will murder your enemies."¹⁹ As in the case cited above, the Rabbi's response is one of confessed guilt and emotional unease: "You have found the spot of my pain, O King of the Khazars! For if only the majority of our people had accepted their poor status out of submission to God and His Torah, as you said, then the Divine Presence would not have left us for this long. However, only a few of us are of this opinion. The majority accept the yoke of exile not only out of compulsion but voluntarily, trying to befriend those who oppress us."²⁰ Thus the two most heartfelt, self-deprecating comments of the Rabbi deal with the Jewish assimilation and the concomitant lack of desire to leave the Exile to go to the Holy Land. It is hard to claim that Halevi is not speaking to his fellow Jews through the voice of the Rabbi.

These two passages stand out stylistically from the rest of the work and are consistent with the epilogue of the *Kuzari*, which sees the Rabbi, perhaps after being shamed by the King as a hypocrite, deciding to make his

¹⁷ The significance of this rebuke has been underscored by Martin Buber in his *Israel and Palestine: The History of an Idea*, trans. Stanley Goodman (London: East and West Library, 1952), p. 68. Buber perceived how the King's reproach had cut the Rabbi to the heart. Here was the Rabbi exhorting the King on the proper way to live, how to enjoy a relationship between God and a chosen people in a chosen land, yet he was unwilling to *live* what he believed. As Buber points out, the Rabbi's justification of his decision in the epilogue to leave for Palestine centers, not on the merits of the Land, but on the need for action and concreteness in religious life.

¹⁸ Book 2, sec. 24.

¹⁹ Book 1, sec. 114.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, sec. 115.

move. Although the King, in the epilogue, reverses his earlier criticism and pleads with the Rabbi to stay (most likely a literary effort on Halevi's part to emphasize the necessity of the move), it is the Rabbi's commitment to actualize what he had been preaching to the King and not let his beliefs remain idle. This creates a general thrust to the work, which the sensitive reader can pick up through these literary cues.

The *Kuzari's* rejection of philosophy in the early sections of book 1 should also be seen in this context. Halevi was not dealing with a solution to the tension between Judaism and Greek philosophy, whether that solution were a rejection of reason in favor of faith or some mediating compromise. Halevi indicted philosophy and all that it implied in twelfth-century Muslim Spain: a cosmopolitan relativism where the good life was contemplation, accessible to all people, irrespective of religious practice. This was the "truth" Halevi rejected in favor of a truly good life cultivated by Jews in the Holy Land, speaking Hebrew, and following the Torah way of life. Since Torah was the truth, there was no need for philosophy.²¹ Spanish Jewry's preoccupation with philosophy did not help the cultivation of religiosity but, instead, only diminished Jewish observance.

Halevi's protest against the entire social order of Jews in Spain was explicit in his poetry and even harsher in his decision to make the pilgrimage and settle in Israel. And, as Cohen pointed out, it was to this attack on Jewish intellectuals that Ibn Daud responded, both in defense of reason and in the reassertion of the rightful authority enjoyed by the Spanish Jewish elite.

With this as the matrix, I am suggesting that the *Kuzari* must be seen as the theological parallel to the Zionide poems. The work was Halevi's effort to persuade all Spanish Jews to realize that their true home was in the Land of Israel. Halevi's intended audience, when writing the *Kuzari*, was the Spanish Jewish elite, the intellectuals and political officers who deemed Spain their home and Muslim culture their birthright. His poetry tried to reach them emotionally, and the *Kuzari*, intellectually.

The *Kuzari*, then, is Halevi's legacy to Spanish Jewry. Cohen found the social function of philosophy to be at the core of the antirationist polemic of the work, the *Kuzari* thus serving as an indictment of Jewish intellectual life. However, we may offer a more sympathetic characterization of Halevi's project. Reading his poetry, one is moved by the poet's pain at his people's plight. It is unlikely that the *Kuzari* was merely a harsh rejection of Spanish culture. Halevi was most likely recommending that all Jews emulate his return to Zion. We need only recall the passage in book 2 of the Rabbi's "spot of embarrassment" to realize that Halevi strongly

²¹ Cohen, p. 298.

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desired all Jews to move to the Holy Land. The claim of this essay is that it was Halevi's devotion to his people that motivated him to write the *Kuzari*. He did not want to spitefully leave all his friends and relatives to the political and social vicissitudes of Andalusia. He preferred to justify his decision to leave Spain, to explain to those still in Spain what he was doing. And although his decision was ultimately an emotional one, he used the contemporary idiom of rational argument, spoken by the Rabbi in the work, to show the necessity for every Jew to return to his or her national homeland.

We may therefore agree that some elements of the work were originally composed as a response to a Karaite philosopher, as Halevi himself indicates in a letter to his friend Halfon. However, the actual motivation for the bulk of the *Kuzari* in its present form was not a (surmised) encouragement by friends to respond to Aristotelianism. It was a justification of the author's move to Israel and a hopeful attempt to persuade other fellow Jews to do the same. The subtitle, "The Book of Refutation and Proof Regarding the *Despised Religion*" (my emphasis), does not indicate that the work is polemical in nature. Rather, it underscores Halevi's point of view that in Exile, Judaism (and Jews) cannot flourish, and Jews must return en masse to Palestine if the Jewish religion is to regain its rightful pride among world religions.

This may also explain why Halevi chose as the literary setting of his work the legendary Jewish King of the Khazars. Even though a Jew was in the seat of royalty, and a "Jewish state" had been established (through conversion), nevertheless, in the final analysis, Halevi wanted to show that the Jew must realize that his place is in Zion and nowhere else.²² After centuries of Jewish cultural and religious efflorescence on foreign soil, Halevi took even Ibn Daud's dream of a Jewish ruler in Spain as ultimately misdirected since it was not in Zion. And the Khazar King is a figure who most closely resembles this Andalusian ideal, which Halevi rejects both personally and in the person of the Rabbi.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE KUZARI

Against the backdrop of this discussion of Halevi's motivation for writing the *Kuzari*, we see that the structure of the work and the thread of the arguments in the first four books (and epilogue) flow directly from the audience being addressed and the message the *Kuzari* is supposed to be

²² One example of Halevi's poetry that reflects this decision is the following: "Better one day on God's soil / Than a thousand on foreign soil. Friendlier are Jerusalem's ruins / Than a palatial mosque. For with these I am redeemed / And with those I serve only cruel ones" (from *Divan des Abul-Hasan* [n. 13 above], vol. 3, no. 87, verses 10–12).

giving. Several literary and structural aspects of the work contribute to this depiction and should be primary considerations in any explanation of the *Kuzari*, given Halevi's proficiency in the use of literary artifice. It would simply be an underestimation of his talent if one were to suggest that Halevi's poetry was deftly and elegantly crafted, while his prose, particularly of such a different nature as philosophy, was disjointed and devoid of any literary sophistication. I have already mentioned the unique, emotive character of two passages. I now briefly review some other literary elements that stand out in the *Kuzari*.

Although the overall style of the work is discursive, reading as a play with several actors, an omniscient narrator does appear in several places. At the very opening of the work, a short narrative provides the reader with the specific context of the *Kuzari*, namely, what circumstances brought the King to search for the true religion. Narrative then interjects after the King explains his dissatisfaction with the Philosopher's explanation of the good life, prompting the searching monarch to call a Muslim and a Christian. The dialogues between the King and the representatives of Christianity and Islam are short, consisting of a capsule of the respective faith claims and the King's dismissal of their arguments as to the truth of their faith. After a Rabbi is fetched to inquire about Judaism, the next time we encounter narrative is at the beginning of the second book, where we are informed that the King has converted to Judaism and is now interested in learning more about it. This narrative interjection is not haphazard. Whatever the King is searching for in his religious quest has apparently been satisfied by the end of the first book, and the following sections only serve to fill in the gaps in the King's very short education. Had Halevi been writing an apologetic defense of Judaism, trying to prove its truth, then, if the King had been convinced by the arguments of the first book, so too should have the reader. The third and final section of narrative comes at the very end of the *Kuzari*, in the section called the epilogue ("*Hatimat ha-sefer*"). Halevi's aim in writing another three books (and then a fourth), as well as the purpose of these three major sections of narrative, must be accounted for in any interpretation of the work.

As Strauss has pointed out, the opening narrative sets the scene for the *Kuzari*, for the King is in search, not of proper dogma or creed, but of right *action*.²³ As the angel informs him, "Your intention is pleasing [to God] but your mode of worship is not pleasing."²⁴ Halevi does not deny that there were many people, indeed many Jews, who were content with their religiosity in Spain. However, authentic religious life required action that was, in its very essence, proper. As the King responded to the Philoso-

²³ Strauss (n. 3 above), p. 119.

²⁴ Book 1, prologue.

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pher, "There is, doubtless, action that is proper in and of itself, not in respect of the doer's intention."²⁵ If Judaism could provide right action only as a by-product of correct belief, then Judaism would be no different from philosophy, for which the life of contemplation also resulted in normative prescriptions. Halevi, like the King, was searching for proper deed per se, trying to establish its centrality and priority in Jewish religious life.

Halevi's first aim is to establish the validity of Jewish uniqueness. If he meant to employ the philosophical language, he had to avoid the universality implicit in rational discourse. In order to maintain the exclusivity of his audience, Halevi, through the Rabbi, cleverly makes use of an Aristotelian doctrine of essences of material things. Aristotle had deemed the rational faculty the highest of the four essences in the world, of which man was the sole possessor. Beneath him were the animals, vegetation, and inanimate objects, each with its respective essence, and it was the goal of each being to actualize that particular essence. The Rabbi thus posits a fifth level of soul, higher than the rational faculty: the divine disposition or essence, of which only the Jews partake. Adding this new level accomplished two things. First, it set the Jews apart from the rest of humanity in their very essence: second, the divine disposition enabled the Jews to be the only receptacles of divine revelation. This brilliant move allowed Halevi to assert the exclusive authority of the Jewish Scriptures, for only the Jews could receive divine communication, and no one else. The very nature of this unique disposition required divine revelation, for only the deity could reveal the normative code by which this essence is fulfilled.²⁶

While this postulate of divine disposition is extremely helpful to the Rabbi's project, since it enables Halevi to depict the Jews as the only possible recipients of divine revelation (prophecy), the Rabbi has yet to establish two (historical) facts to ensure that rabbinic Judaism is perceived as the authentic revelation: (a) that revelation did in fact occur to the Jews at Sinai, and (b) that the rabbinical form of Judaism is identical to the code revealed at Sinai. For this, the Rabbi uses Sa'adya's familiar formulation that true knowledge can be received through either direct sensory perception (the generation of Jews at Sinai) or flawless transmission.²⁷ The public character of the event would ensure its validity, for anyone who would try

²⁵ Book 1, sec. 2.

²⁶ I must here concede the point Guttman raises (*Philosophies of Judaism* [n. 3 above], p. 130) that, in the traditional Neoplatonic scheme, the form principle must of necessity bestow form on material that has realized its essence. This would then take away free choice from God. If God is the ultimate decider, then there is no foolproof formula, and it would be difficult to convince people to take a course of action that only *may* produce the desired results. Halevi straddles the fence, never willing to take either side of the argument to its logical conclusion.

²⁷ Sa'adya, *Sefer Emunot ve-de'ot le-rav Sa'adyah Gaon, tsilum ha-defus ha-rishon, Kushta 322* (Jerusalem: Makor, 1972), pp. 8–13.

to present a deceptive or false version would immediately be corrected by others who either experienced it or received the authentic account through transmission.

The notion of correct action, as emphasized from the very outset, is delineated again in a pivotal passage of the first book. Discussing how one's deeds determine the reception of form according to the divine disposition, the Rabbi concludes: "And this is the root of both faith and apostasy."²⁸ When pressed about this apparent contradiction, the Rabbi explains that only the divine can reveal the code for being able to realize the divine form (as stated above). Whoever accepts the Torah and observes its commandments devotionally is considered the true believer. But if one divinely disposed uses human reason and speculation to achieve his or her goal, then that individual is worse than the average rational person, for a part of that person's disposition is not being realized. This is based entirely on an Aristotelian premise that every object strives to fulfill its essence, to realize its disposition.

The first book then, has established that the Jews are a unique strand among humanity. The Pentateuch that they have is, due to flawless transmission (secs. 48–52), the same prescriptive code received from God by the Jews at Sinai, and that code alone can elevate them to realize their divine disposition. Point by point, the argument is developed as follows:

1. There is a highest level of form called the divine form, to which the material must be disposed (secs. 29–43).

2. Only this disposition enables communication between the divine and the material, and this is revelation or prophecy.

3. Adam was of this divinely disposed material, and it was passed down exclusively through individuals to Jacob, who passed it on to all his descendants, namely, the Jews (secs. 47, 95).

4. An event that occurred to many cannot be falsely transmitted (an epistemological claim; secs. 48–52).

(After sec. 52, there follow long discourses on transmission—when it is credible, and when not—and its implications for the age of the world, the claims of the philosophers, etc. Section 95 restores us to the line of argument in sec. 47.)

5. Only God can reveal how to realize the divine disposition (sec. 98).

6. From points 2 and 3, it follows that only the Jews can experience revelation (explicitly inferred in sec. 103).

7. From points 5 and 6, it follows that the contents of the revelation to the Jews can be the code for how one realizes the divine disposition. By point 3, this code can be applicable only to Jews.

²⁸ Book 1, sec. 97.

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8. Therefore the account of the revelation at Sinai and its contents are to be accepted as true and binding on each and every Jew in keeping with the axiom that material must try to realize its disposition (sec. 109).

It is at this juncture, toward the end of book 1, after the Rabbi has convinced the King of the unique nature of the Jews, that they have their conversation cited above, whether the Jews act in a truly unique fashion. The King accuses the Jews of being ready to behave just as hypocritically as those of other religions, were they but given the opportunity. And the Rabbi only responds that, had Jews accepted their downtrodden position willingly, their unique disposition would have been realized. The Rabbi uses this context to refer to conversion, that a convert to Judaism must not merely accept the faith of the Jews verbally but must also be ready to act according to all the prescriptions and proscriptions of Jewish law. However, given the Rabbi's biological model, the convert cannot achieve the same level as the natural Jew, in terms of closeness to God, an implication the Rabbi unabashedly draws. This seems to favor the theory that the work was aimed not at the non-Jews as an apologetic, for they would surely be offended by these "racist" claims. Rather, his audience was the Jews of Spain, and Halevi wanted to convince them of their uniqueness and their consequent responsibility to fulfill that special quality, even if it meant leaving Spain.

Notwithstanding this seeming deterrent, book 2 begins with a narrative describing the conversion of the King, his vizier, and subsequently the entire Khazar nation. What was described in book 1 was obviously sufficient to convince the King that Judaism was the solution to his quest, which began with his dream. Even though no laws were mentioned or discussed, the King accepted Judaism, persuaded that Judaism was indeed a religion of right action. This parallels the Jewish covenant struck at Sinai, in which the Jews, after hearing that God would take them as a treasured nation, accepted on themselves the laws without having heard them: "*na'aseh ve-nishma*"—we will do and listen." Without knowing the full contents of the code, they promised to do it. In fact, the Talmud views the Jews at Sinai as converts.²⁹

Having posited throughout book 1 the unique divine disposition Jews possess, the King begins book 2 by inquiring into the way the divine is referred to in the Bible.³⁰ Given the conclusion of book 1 (that the Jews experienced the revelation with all their senses), it is appropriate to ask whether all the biblical references to God are to be understood literally or not. The Rabbi uses this opportunity to claim that at Sinai the Jews experienced the Tetragrammaton, God's personal name. This topic also serves

²⁹ Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 46b.

³⁰ Book 2, secs. 2–8.

the crucial function of acting as a springboard to mention "God's land" as part of the overall description of how the Jewish people realizes its disposition.³¹ In the accepted Aristotelian fashion, the formula for fulfillment is all encompassing; in this case, it is the Jewish people in the Jewish land living according to the Torah. A lengthy discussion of the land of Israel ensues, occupying no less than one-fifth of the second book, with the Rabbi showing how crucial the land is to the realization of the divine form.³² The Rabbi gives an explicit analogy: "Just like your hill of which you say that vineyards grow successfully there—if you did not plant the right vines there, nor cultivate them properly, grapes wouldn't grow. So too the unique disposition is given to the treasured nation, to be in the special land, and their actions and observances are like the vineyard's cultivation. However, it is unlike the analogy in that the vineyard will produce grapes somewhere else also, but the unique people cannot attach themselves to the Divine Thing except in this land."³³ The reference in the last line is clearly aimed at those who thought they could be "full Jews" outside of the land, such as in Spain. Only all the Jews moving to "God's Land" could bring about the desired end of a realized divine disposition on the national level.

The discussion of the land culminates with the King admonishing the Rabbi for not living in Israel, which would be the natural conclusion of his admiration of the Land and the indispensable role it plays in the fulfillment of his disposition.³⁴ The Rabbi accepts the rebuke in the emotional manner we already indicated, and there ends the discussion of Palestine.³⁵

As mentioned above, the opening discourse on the attributes of God sparks several subsequent questions that are actually Halevi's main concern to bring out: not only is the land of Israel considered God's land, but other aspects of the Torah are associated with his name, for example, "the fires of God" and "God's Law."³⁶ In keeping with this theme, the discussion of the Torah centers not on the details of proper Torah observance but on how the following of the commandments serves to cultivate the divine disposition.³⁷ The second book ends with a discussion of the exclusive nature of Hebrew, Israel's language.³⁸ This is the last criterion, albeit technical, of reaching the high level that one of divine disposition can reach. It is not imperative in that knowledge of Hebrew does not cultivate

³¹ *Ibid.*, sec. 9.

³² *Ibid.*, secs. 9–22.

³³ *Ibid.*, sec. 12.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, sec. 23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, sec. 24.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, "The fires of God": secs. 26 ff.; "God's Law": sec. 56.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, sec. 44.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, secs. 67–81.

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the disposition *per se*, but it is necessary in order to receive the divine word, in any form, which is given in Hebrew. This is very similar to the Arabic emphasis and glorification of the Arabic language, but in a different way. Arabic was valued because it was the means of divine revelation in the Qur'an. Hebrew was indispensable because without it there could be no divine revelation. Every Jew can potentially be a prophet, though not everyone becomes one. Therefore, Hebrew is a prerequisite only to the highest levels of realizing the divine soul.

Thus, the bulk of book 2 covered many of the areas of Jewish Spanish culture that Halevi intended to address: the centrality of Palestine, the critical need for Torah observance, and the importance of Hebrew. For a community that was quite settled in Spain, rather lax in observance, and more impressed with Arabic than Hebrew, these discussions cut right to the heart of the comfort Jews felt living in Spain.

If my thesis is correct, the *Kuzari* might have been able to end here. However, the majority of the arguments of the first two books had been conducted at the level of the *community* of Israel. The Rabbi now seeks to explore the individual Jew, and how he or she can fulfill his or her essence, both as a person who can commune with God and as a member of a people with a specific goal. It is also likely that, given the weakness in observance among Spanish Jewry, this would be a good encapsulated review of proper Jewish conduct.

That every Jew is responsible, in part, for the fulfillment of the entire people's goals is brought out early on in book 3 through the vehicle of the Platonic ideal of the "political man":

Rabbi: The pious Jew is in charge of his state, supplying its inhabitants with all their needs, as they need them, distributing them justly. . . .

King: I asked of a pious Jew, not a ruler.

Rabbi: The pious Jew is himself a ruler, who governs his passions and desires, spiritual and physical . . . and he is the person worthy of ruling the state.³⁹

The echo of Plato's *Republic* is evident, and Halevi's description is thorough, covering the pious Jew's thoughts, feelings, and actions. This is not merely the religious instruction of a recent convert. This is an attempt, on Halevi's part, to reinvigorate and revitalize the spirit and Torah observance of Spanish Jewry. In the end, all Jews must do their part in realizing their own disposition and achieving the goals of the entire people. This explains why Halevi, in the figure of the Rabbi, decides to move alone to a land of Israel whose social and political condition were hardly conducive to the cultivation of the divine disposition. It would be best if all the Jews went, but that cannot excuse Halevi from going either.

³⁹ Book 3, secs. 5 ff.

Whether or not book 3 was a prior work of Halevi's, only here is it appropriate for the Rabbi to take up the issue of Karaism, for only in this book is the subject of divine and rabbinic laws treated. It is also the point of divergence with Karaites, for everything asserted until now—the uniqueness of the Jewish disposition, the primacy of living in Palestine, and the necessity to live by the revealed law—are agreed on by Rabbinite and Karaite alike. It is only over the content of the revelation that the two parties disagree, and while that dispute is fundamental, it is not relevant until this point in the discussion. The Rabbi does not rest until the King himself sees the need for an oral law to explain the often elusive and ambiguous divine prescriptions. Thus, book 3's response to Karaism, which is likely of prior origin, is more neatly embedded in the larger scheme of the work than Schweid's account would suggest.

With book 3, Halevi again might have been able to end, but as a talented artist and thinker, his task was incomplete. All his major points had been developed, aimed at the assimilating Spanish Jewish community. However, the fourth book was added only to complete Halevi's initial thesis, that the Jews have a divine disposition that alone makes prophecy possible. The Rabbi here ties up loose ends, describing the nature of the being who is the pinnacle of the created order, and the example of one with a realized divine essence: the prophet. Everything about prophecy—the vision, when and where it takes place—are discussed in this section, and Halevi separated it from the other three books precisely because its function was different from the others.

For Halevi, prophecy is rooted in sense experience, not in reason.⁴⁰ His professional field emphasized the value of empirical natural science. He even felt it to be indispensable to God's Law: the last part of the fourth book deals with *Sefer ha-Yetzirah*, the Book of Creation, which explains the phenomena of the natural world. Yet Halevi's ideal person is in contrast to this. To reach the goal of the Jew—piety and, if possible, prophecy—the Jew would have to go through the active, sensual, and emotional world. The prophet, who stands at the top of Halevi's hierarchy of human beings, can prophesy only at certain times and in certain places. Compare this to the rationalist prophet of Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, who must learn natural science, physics, and metaphysics as preparation for prophetic vision. The scientist takes his mind wherever he goes, but it is the poet who can legitimately say: "I am not inspired here; I must go elsewhere." Time, place, and language are the necessary and crucial elements for a poet's inspiration. So, too, for the prophetic vision.

⁴⁰ Book 4, sec. 16.

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CONCLUSION

Halevi's thesis is now before us. Given the context, as Cohen suggests, that Halevi was dissatisfied and despaired of successful Jewish life in exile, particularly in Spain, the *Kuzari* may be understood as a theological justification for leaving the Diaspora and moving to Zion. Halevi's theory involves a holistic formula for realizing the divine disposition, which can serve as a guidebook for every Jew, for no Jew is exempt from the obligation to realize his or her essence. The epilogue of the book—the Rabbi's decision to move to the land of Israel—is now understood as the appropriate ending for the book. In light of both Goitein's Geniza discovery and stylistic considerations, the fifth book must be seen as a later addition, an antiphilosophical treatise that was appended after the book and its contents were largely shaped to address a complacent and assimilating Jewry. This account explains how Halevi's rejection of Jewish courtier life in Spain and his justification (indeed, mandating) of a move to the land of Israel allowed him to canvass a wide range of topics, from the larger issues of philosophy to subjects such as the relation of Jews and non-Jews and the greatness of Hebrew and the land of Israel.

Most important, this attempt to make sense of the structure of the five books, of its own integrity and its own central thesis, reflects the need for every interpreter to know the author of the work, to become familiar with and appreciate the author's literary strengths and weaknesses. The *Kuzari* is but one example of a work in which, if we are to examine it properly, we must pick up the cues the author gives us, while being fully aware of the social setting and philosophic age in which he or she is writing. Anything less is simply unjust.