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Jehuda Halevi - The Poet, 1921.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER.
ON JEHUDA HALEVI--THE POET, AT THE
TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING, JANUARY 9th,
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When the sun set on Jewish life in Babylonia in the Tenth Century, it rose again on Jewish life in Spain. With the death of Saadia, the author of that famous *Emunot ve Deoth*--"The Living Philosophy," in 942 the Sura in Babylonia, the intellectual as well as the physical life of Babylonian Jewry began to disintegrate.

Spain, since the Eighth Century, had come under the influence of the Mohammedans, and Spain in the Tenth Century had become the great center of Arabic culture and art and science. The city of Cordova could vie with the ancient glories of Athens and Alexandria, and the cities of Seville, Granada and Toledo boasted of their universities and of their general atmosphere of culture and refinement. And so it is not to be wondered at that before very long Spain became the magnet attracting Jews from all parts of the world, who loved the sweet graciousness and reasonableness of Arabic culture and civilization.

From the Tenth Century, then, to the Fifteenth Century the history of the Jews in Spain is a glorious one. It is always referred to as the Golden Age in Jewish post-Biblical history. The genius of the Jew, under the benign

influence of a tolerant civilization, developed and gave forth beautiful flowers as well as beautiful fruit. It was a many-sided development of this genius of the Jew in Spain. Notwithstanding those who say that the creative genius of the Jew is to be found only in one direction, namely, the religious, the fact remains that given the opportunity, the gifts and the talents and capacities of the Jew will express themselves in many and varied ways.

The Jew in Spain during these four hundred years gained recognition and achieved excellence in statesmanship, in politics, in science, in astronomy, in mathematics, in cartography, in medicine, in philosophy and in poetry.

Beginning with the name of Chadai ibn Shaprut in 970, we meet with such names as the son of the great grammarian; , who, together with ibn Labat, began the scientific study of Hebrew philology. We meet with the name of Samuel Hauagid, the prince, vizier to the ruler of Granada; a statesman of the first rank, a poet and writer of hymns, a patron of letters and a student of Jewish learning, whose introduction to the Talmud (the Mebb'ha Talmud) is still a standard work.

And after Samuel Hauagid we meet with the immortal name of Soloman ibn Gabirol, in the Eleventh Century, whose great religious poem, "The Royal Crown," is perhaps the greatest bit of religious poetry outside the canon of the Bible; Of Soloman ibn Gabirol, Heine said, "This pious nightingale sang not to a rose but to his God."

And then we meet with Bachya ibn Pakuda, the famous author of the famous "Hobeth ha Lebaloth"--The Duties of the Heart,--which became the devotional manual of Israel throughout the world up to this day.

Then we meet with those famous names of Moses ibn Ezra and Abraham ibn Ezra--the first called the poet of poets because his poetry is pervaded with a sweetly restrained and softened melancholy throughout; and then the greater ibn Ezra--Abraham ibn Ezra--a poet of the first order; the father of modern Biblical criticism; a traveller, a step-child of fortune; a man who met his fate and destiny with a sweet irony.

It was he who said, "If I were to sell shrouds men would stop dying; if I were to sell lamps, the sun would never set." It was this same ibn Ezra who wrote that beautiful quatrain commenting also on his terrible fortunes. "I get up early in the morning to visit the house of the prince and they tell me, 'Well, he is gone away.' And then I come back late in the evening and they tell me, 'He is gone to bed.' He either goes to bed or he goes afar. Woe unto the poor man who is born without a lucky star."

And it was the same ibn Ezra who, the day before he died, wrote this to be put upon his tombstone: "And Abraham was 78 years old when he left the burning wrath of this world." It is a Hebrew sentence. Abraham left Haran, the place, and Haran, in Hebrew, means "wrath."

I wish I had time to speak of Abraham ibn Ezra, and perhaps some day in the future I shall.

And then we meet the names of Jehuda Halevi, in whom Spanish-Jewish literature finds its most perfect expression; and Moses Maimonides, in whom Jewish philosophy finds its most complete and profound exposition. Heine, the Halevi of the Nineteenth Century, wrote: "Jehuda ibn Halevi was not only scribe and scholar but of poetry a master, and was himself a famous poet--yes, a great and famous poet; star and torch to guide his time, light and beacon of his nation; he was a wonderful and mighty fiery pillar of sweet significance, moving on in front of Israel's caravan of woe and mourning in the wilderness of exile; 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 forever after thrilled through all the poet's numbers by that gracious deed inspired."

There is very little to say about Halevi's early life. He was born in Toledo in the year 1086--the year that Alphonso VI recaptured Toledo from the Moors. Toledo was a great center of Jewish, of Arabic and of Christian culture. He spent his early life in study, and at an early age showed great skill as a versifier; he wrote many elegies and eulogies and serenades, all having an eloquence and charm, all having a refinement, that singled him out from among the many poetes of his day.

From among the many poems of his day.

Halevi in his youth was touching all the lighter moods of life with a skill and a dexterity that marked him as a coming great poet. Even among his early poems there are some Nature lyrics that have the majesty, the power, of some of his later great poems; more especially one, called "The Stormy Sea," the very reading of which creates this fine illusion of the sea tumbling and rolling, whipped by a mighty, furious storm. I shall not attempt to translate in part the poem, because it is very difficult, but I shall read a few lines to give you the sound, the imagery, created by the very words of the poem.

* * *

And so on down through fifty or sixty lines of magnificent Hebrew poetry describing the sea in storm.

Halevi prepared himself for a profession. Art in those days was not yet a profession; nor was scholarship, nor learning, nor the rabbinate; it was an avocation, in keeping with the old injunction of the rabbis--one should not make his knowledge or his talents "a shovel with which to dig." He studied medicine and became a physician, but he complains bitterly in many of his poems that his profession takes up so much of his time that he has not the opportunity to devote himself to the things that he loves best. He says that his profession is "consuming my life," and that people are "consuming my time with their infirmities."

In one of his poems he has a prayer that he used to pronounce before he issued a prescription, in which prayer he confesses that as far as he, himself, is concerned, he has absolutely no faith in the value of his prescription or his drugs. At least, Halevi was honest and had a sense of humor.

In his advancing years, in his wider experience and the profound insight which he gained in ^{the} life of humanity, and more especially in the life of his own people, Halevi's poetry assumes a deeper tone, a greater depth and height, a more spiritual character; and it is of this later period that we get some of the poems, which, at their best, compare with the almost matchless beauty of some of the psalms of the Bible.

Halevi's poetry is principally religious poetry, just as is the poetry of Israel throughout. From the days of Miriam and Deborah, through the Psalms, through the poesy of the Agada,

up to this day, the great poetry of Israel is religious poetry. It is true that we have the "Song of Songs," which is a love song, and it is true that even Halevi himself wrote many romances, songs of love, and songs about Nature, but they are neither in number nor of literary merit comparable to the greatness and the sublimity and the enduring quality of the real religious poems of Israel.

The reason is not far to see. In the first place, the genius of the Jew, while not exclusively so, is

principally a religious genius. The Jew speaks authoritatively, with power, with might, when he speaks in religious terminology; and, secondly, the physical life of our people, the life of exile, the life of expulsions, the life of the ghetto, the cramped and narrow life, did not permit that freedom of real lyricism, that superb nature poetry which can be created only by a people that lives on its own soil and draws strength and inspiration from the soil.

Medieval Jewish poetry suffers from this fact. It is urbane; it is somewhat too artificial, too sophisticated, too refined; it is too intellectual; it is cunningly wrought with many twists and convolutions and many quotations; but it lacks the simplicity, the directness, the immediateness and the power which comes from a people that lives on its soil and feels the inspiration that comes from a normal, natural, lovely life.

But when the Jewish poet sings of God and of man's relation to God, and of God's people (Israel), and of Israel's land (Zion), then the Jewish poet is thoroughly at home, and his inspiration is immediate and overpowering, and his passions unrestrained and unfettered; and when he sings of God and of man's relation to God, and of God's people (Israel) and of Israel's land (Palestine), he is superb, he is incomparable.

Jehuda Halevi is a mystic even in his philosophy, for besides writing many beautiful poems he also wrote a

great philosophic text book, known as the Kusari, of which I have not the time to speak; but he is a mystic and a poet even in his philosophy. A mystic is a man who sees not only the drop of dew but also sees the little bit of Heaven that is mirrored in that drop of dew; a mystic is a man who apprehends God directly and immediately and intuitively and passionately; who does not know a thing necessarily, but who loves a thing; he does not know the value intellectually, but he loves it with fervor and passion and adoration.

Halevi's god is the god of the mystic--personal, indwelling, near; a great kinsman, a mighty friend in time of need. And it is to this god that Halevi dedicates many of his most tender and beautiful poems.

One reads like this:

"With all my heart, in truth, and passion strong,
I love Thee; both in solitude and throng
Thy name's with me, alone I shall not bide:
My friend art Thou, though others from me glide.
My lamp art too: my light shall never fade,
Nor shall my foot e'er slip, by Thee upstayed.
They little knew who have despised me so,
That shaming me doth cause my pride to glow.
O Fountain of my life, I'll bless Thee aye,
And sing Thy praises, O my song, always!"

And yet again he speaks:

"Servants of time, lo! these be slaves of slaves;
But the Lord's servant hath his freedom whole,
Therefore when every man his portion craves,
The Lord God is my portion saith my soul."

Had I the time I would read to you that beautiful poem, "Servant of God," which has been translated by Israel Zangwell; a poem which is a part of the liturgy of the Day of Atonement, but I am afraid I have not the time for it.

The second theme of Halevi's poem is God's people-- Israel. No man loved Israel as much as this son of Israel, Halevi. Even in his philosophy Halevi gave unto Israel a place of preeminence such as no prophet before him or any poet since has given unto this people. Halevi, in his book *Kusari*, speaks of the prophet as being in a kingdom all by himself. "The prophet is removed from the ordinary man even as the ordinary ^{man} is removed from the animal kingdom."

Halevi was the first man to have given a complete definition to the idea of the superman. The superman, to Halevi, is the genius, the prophet, the inspired man who receives his information intuitively and by revelation; he is both the philosopher and in a kingdom all his own. He differs from the philosopher not in degree but almost in kind, and Israel, according to Halevi, is the prophetic people; the people that has been the channel for divine revelation from Adam to his day. And so Israel, in the

mind of Halevi, occupies a kingdom of its own--a position of unique grandeur and sublimity in the economy of God's world.

Halevi, I say, loved his people and knew the suffering of his people. Ten years after Halevi was born the first Crusade began--in 1096--and the first Crusade, moving down the Rhine, left exterminated Jewish communities behind it. It was a "time of great affliction." And Halevi knew of the suffering of his people, and so in some of his finest of poems Halevi says, "How can food and drink taste sweet unto me when I see the dogs dragging thy young lions? How can the light of day be sweet unto my eyes when I see ravens feeding upon the bodies of thy eagles?"

And over and over again throughout his poetry is this tragic refrain, this plaintive note: "Why is He who dwells on high removed from us?" And then comes that cunningly wrought but powerful refrain: "My beloved God has removed himself from us." "But my oppressor presses hard." * * *

There are many of these tragic songs of Halevi, but in spite of it all he never lost faith in the indestructibility of his people. I have sometimes spoken to you in the past of my faith--the eternal quality of the people. Well, it was Halevi who, nearly a thousand years ago, first gave almost prophetic expression to this undying faith of his people; that in spite of their suffering and

their torments and their universal crucifixion, they are indestructible. And so in one of his most beautiful poems he says:

"The sun and moon unchanging do obey
The laws that never cease or night or day.
Appointed signs are they to Jacob's seed
That life eternal hath been them decreed.
And though, O Lord, thy left hand dealeth pain,
Thy right shall lead them back to joy again.
Let not despair oppress their quailing heart,
Though radiant Fortune from their midst depart.
But let this constant faith their soul uphold,
That in the Book of Life their name's enrolled
For all eternity: nor shall they cease
While night and day do alternate in peace."

The third theme of Halevi's poetry is Zion: God--Israel--Jerusalem. Zion was the supreme passion of Halevi's life; he loved it as one who loves his adored, and to it he poured out his soul in beautiful, immortal lines. Palestine to Halevi was more than a country; to him it was the only place where the genius of the Jew could have its natural and normal expression. Just as he says in his *Kusari*--a plant needs a certain kind of soil;

so the spirit and the genius of the Jew need Palestine for their full and natural development. In that he was merely true to the old tradition of our people which began with the destruction of the temple. You recall that sentence of the rabbi--"He who walks four paces in Jerusalem is assured of immortality." And no people that did not love the land as they loved could have dared to indulge in such a hyperbole. "The man who walks four paces in Jerusalem is assured of immortality,"--do you know how much of real passionate longing that expresses? And then again the rabbi says, "It is better to live in Palestine amongst strangers than it is to live in exile among friends."

Halevi echoes and re-echoes that same sentence. Perhaps his most beautiful single lyric is that dedicated to Jerusalem:

"Oh! city of the world, most chastely fair;
In the far west, behold I sigh for thee.
And in my yearning love I do bethink me,
Of bygone ages; of thy ruined fane,
Thy vanished splendour of a vanished day.
Oh! had I eagles' wings I'd fly to thee,
And with my falling tears make moist thine earth.
I long for thee; what though indeed thy kings
Have passed forever; though where once up-rose
Sweet balsam-trees the serpent makes his nest.
Oh! that I might embrace thy dust, the sod
Were sweet as honey to my fond desire."

Halevi determined late in life to go to Palestine; he felt his life was incomplete until he saw the Holyland. And so after he had passed middle life he leaves his home, the circle of his friends, his daughter and his son, and, against the urging and persuasion of all his friends--and he had hosts of them, for he was an exceedingly popular and well-beloved man--he starts out for Palestine, in those perilous days when Mohammedan and Christian were fighting for the Holyland. He arrives in Egypt, and in Egypt he is welcomed by the elite of the country. His passage through Egypt was a triumphal passage, and his friends in Egypt urged him not to go on to Palestine but to abide with them, but Halevi insists, and so we know that Halevi left Egypt and came to Palestine. We hear of him in Tyre, and we hear of him again in Damascus, but then we lose track of him forever.

We do not know how he died, when he died, where he died or where he is buried; but we do know that on this journey from his own city to Palestine he wrote those magnificent and superb odes dedicated to Zion, the most famous of which I shall read, and with that I shall be through. This ode to Zion is read on the 9th day of Ab in the synagogues--the Fast of Ab.

"Art thou not, Zion, fain
To send forth greetings from thy sacred rock
Unto thy captive train,
Who greet thee as the remnants of thy flock?

Take thou on every side,
East, west, and south and north, their greetings
multiplied.

Sadly he greets thee still,
The prisoner of hope who, day and night,
Sheds ceaseless tears, like dew on Hermon's hill.
Would that they fell upon thy mountain's height!

Harsh is my voice, when I bewail thy woes.
But when in fancy's dream
I see thy freedom, forth its cadence flows,
Sweet as the harps, that hung by Babel's stream.
My heart is sore distressed
For Bethel ever blessed,
For Peniel and each ancient, sacred place.
The holy presence there
To me is present, where
Thy Maker opes thy gates, the gates of heaven to face.

The glory of the Lord will ever be
Thy sole and perfect light;
No need hast thou then, to illumine thee,
Of sun by day, or moon and stars by night.
I would that, where God's spirit was of yore
Poured out upon thy holy ones, I might
There, too, my soul outpour.
The house of kings and throne of God wert thou,
How comes it then that now

Slaves fill the throne where sat thy kings before?

Oh, who will lead me on
To seek the spots where, in far distant years,
The angels in their glory dawned upon
Thy messengers and seers?
Oh, who will give me wings
That I may fly away,
And there, at rest from all my wanderings,
The ruins of my heart among thy ruins lay?

I'll bend my face unto thy soil, and hold
Thy stones as precious gold.
And when in Hebron I have stood beside
My father's tombs, then will I pass in turn
Thy plains and forest wide;
Until I stand on Gilead and discern
Mount Hor and Mount Abarim 'neath whose crest
Thy luminaries twain thy guides and beacons rest.

Thy air is life unto my soul, thy grains
Of dust are myrrh, thy streams with honey flow;
Nakes and barefoot, to thy ruined fanes
How gladly would I go
To where the ark was treasured, and in dim
Recesses dwelt the holy cherubim.

Perfect in beauty, Zion, how in thee
Do love and grace unite!

The souls of thy companions tenderly

Turn unto thee; thy joy was their delight,
And weeping they lament thy ruin now.

In distant exile, for thy sacred height
They long, and towards thy gates in prayer they bow.

Thy flocks are scattered o'er the barren waste,
Yet do they not forget thy sheltering fold,

Unto thy garments' fringe they cling, and haste
The branches of the palms to seize and hold.

The Lord desires thee for His dwelling-place

Eternally, and bless'd

Is he whom God has chosen for the grace

Within thy courts to rest.

Happy is he that watches, drawing near,

Until he sees thy glorious lights arise,
And over whom thy dawn breaks full and clear
Set in the orient skies.

But happiest he who, with exultant eyes,

The bliss of thy redeemed ones shall behold,
And see thy youth renewed as in days of old."

I said that no one knows where Halevi died or how he died; but Jewish legend knows, and the story is told that Halevi, returning from Damascus, approached the city of Jerusalem--the delight of all the world. As he reached it he threw himself upon the ground, prostrating himself, and kissed its dust--the dust that was as dear to him as

life itself; and just then an Arab horseman dashed out and hurled his spear at Halevi and killed him; and Halevi's dust, so says the legend, mingled with the dust of the land he loved so dearly.

And his last words were these:

"Zion, dost thou wish to know

concerning the welfare of thy children?

Captives in distant lands,

who long and pray for the day when thy dawn

will break clear,

And thy youth will be renewed again as in the

days of old."

Halevi--minstrel of God, singer of his people's martyrdom and hope, was loved as no poet was loved by his people, and the wonders of his hymns, scattered throughout the liturgy of our people, have helped to inspire faith and hope and courage and endurance in the hearts of our sorely tried brethern in the ages gone by.

So that when Heine said of him that he was "the torch and the beacon of his people," Heine, the Jew, knew and understood.

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