



Joseph Yahalom

***Yehudah Halevi: The Secular Poems; The Original Diwan with Supplements [Hebrew]***

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Joseph Yahalom, an esteemed emeritus professor of Hebrew literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a renowned scholar of medieval Jewish poetry, has undertaken an monumental task in editing the full collection of Yehudah Halevi's secular poems. This volume, a landmark publication, presents for the first time a comprehensive edition of these poems, meticulously reconstructed from the original collection compiled by Halevi's contemporary, Haya the Maghribean, who personally encountered the poet in Egypt. Yahalom's profound scholarship, previously evidenced in his 2009 monograph *Yehuda Halevi: Poetry and Pilgrimage*, is once again on full display, offering an invaluable contribution to the study of medieval Hebrew literature.

The significance of this publication cannot be overstated, particularly given the intricate and often fragmented history of Halevi's *Diwan*. For centuries, the complete scope of his poetic output remained elusive. The earliest substantial effort to gather his poems traces back to the acquisition of the finest and most ancient manuscript of Halevi's *Diwan* by the prominent Italian-Jewish intellectual Samuel David Luzzatto in Tunis in 1839. This acquisition led to the publication of two selections of poems in Lyck in 1864, yet these represented only a fraction of his complete oeuvre. The dream of a complete edition remained unrealized until the late nineteenth century, when the exceptionally talented young Heinrich Brody, who would later become chief rabbi of Prague, took on the formidable challenge of publishing the *Diwan*.

Further crucial insights into Halevi's life and work emerged from the groundbreaking research of the gifted historian S. D. Goitein. During his meticulous exploration of the Cairo Genizah—that unparalleled treasure trove of medieval Hebrew manuscripts—Goitein unearthed autograph Arabic letters by Judah Halevi himself, alongside correspondence from his circle of friends and acquaintances detailing his visit to Egypt. These discoveries, which Goitein began publishing in Jerusalem in 1954, provided an invaluable biographical lens through which to interpret Halevi's poems, supplementing the textual analysis with concrete historical context. Yahalom, building upon these foundations, employs the wealth of contemporary correspondence discovered over the past five decades within the Cairo Genizah collections to reconstruct the poet's life and times with unprecedented detail. This meticulous approach, which involves discussing and translating Judeo-Arabic incipits into Hebrew, is central to Yahalom's primary objective: to illuminate Halevi's biography through the very texts he produced.

The book integrates a considerable amount of technical analysis, delving into the intricate genealogy of Halevi's entire poetic collection. Yahalom expertly traces how the *Diwan* was edited and reedited across East and West, reflecting the significant crossroads and geographical shifts in the poet's life. This is achieved through a rigorous comparison of the poems with autobiographical letters and contemporary correspondence from the Genizah, presenting many poems in their original Hebrew alongside Yahalom's insightful commentary. Yahalom's central task, therefore, is not merely to present the poems but to use them as primary sources for reconstructing the multifaceted life of a poet whose experiences spanned the most important centers of medieval Jewry: Christian Spain, Muslim Spain, and, ultimately, the East, culminating in his fabled journey to the Land of Israel from Egypt.

Yehudah Halevi, widely recognized as one of the preeminent poets in postbiblical Hebrew literature, was a master of both secular and devotional verse. His poetic activity was truly dispersed, encompassing compositions penned on the soil of northern and southern Spain, at sea, and in Egypt. A defining characteristic of Halevi's genius was his extraordinary ability to revitalize antiquated or worn-out metaphors, imbuing them with renewed strength and vigor. This geographical dispersion, however, simultaneously presented the immense challenge of compiling his diverse poems into a complete and organized *Diwan*.

The *Diwan* itself is broadly structured into two main sections. Beyond the social poems commissioned for various occasions and his deeply personal devotional pieces, Halevi uniquely bridged the secular and sacred realms. He also composed poetry specifically for liturgical use in the synagogue. The secular poetry in the *Diwan* exhibits distinct formal characteristics. A prominent feature is the use of monorhyme writing, where a single rhyme binds the verses from beginning to end, creating a cohesive and often mesmerizing sonic unity. Alongside this, Halevi was also celebrated for his strophic poems. In these, each strophic unit possesses its own distinct rhyme, resulting in a poem characterized by a rich variety of rhymes. What unifies these diverse stanzas is a common meter, shared across all stanzas of the poem. Furthermore, a specialized form of strophic poetry, prevalent in Spain, featured a short

addition at the end of each stanza, composed of brief lines with a uniform rhyme common to all sections of the addition, adding another layer of formal sophistication to his work.

While Halevi's religious and national meditations and songs are often regarded as his noblest achievements, the distinction between his so-called sacred and secular poems is not always straightforward. Indeed, the traditional division proposed by Harkavy into secular and sacred is largely considered inadequate. Brody's more nuanced categorization into liturgical and nonliturgical offers a more fitting framework. Although some of Halevi's poems were undeniably intended for communal prayer, the vast majority of his oeuvre, regardless of its explicit purpose, is deeply imbued with religious sentiment. This inherent spirituality often blurs the lines, making a clear-cut demarcation between sacred and secular poetry difficult, if not impossible.

Another significant group of Halevi's secular poems comprises occasional pieces composed for specific events such as the death of his revered teacher or the marriage of Ibn Megash. The majority of these extant occasional poems are eulogies or laments. These often intertwine profound personal grief with a pervasive sense of cosmic desolation, as Halevi often perceived in the death of a friend or fellow Jew a reflection of the fate of the entire Jewish nation.

A particularly poignant example, highlighted in the text, is a moving poem describing an intimate visit by a lovesick bride to her aunt's house:

She went out before you, all of her belonging to you entirely  
From the day when she did not profane, your holiness she profaned  
She was astonished greatly at your ascension to the holy mountain  
For she saw strangers ascend while she did not ascend  
And she stood at a distance, bowing opposite  
Your temple, from every place where she had been exiled  
Words of her supplication she sent to you as an offering  
Her heart and her eyes she hung toward your throne.  
Behold, she clings to you with love and desires you  
After your friendship she walked and did not stray.

This poem, at first glance a tender personal narrative, carries profound allegorical weight. The “bride” here is a powerful metaphor for the community of Israel, recoiling at the sight of strangers occupying the holy place, forced to be content with a distant glimpse from the very place of her exile. Instead of a traditional offering, she sends her “aunt,” a stand-in for a spiritual guide or perhaps even the divine presence, the gift of a poem, her heart and eyes fixed longingly on the sacred space. The poem concludes with a powerful expression of eternal loyalty, encapsulating the unwavering devotion of the Jewish people despite their dispersed state. This exemplifies how Halevi seamlessly infused his “secular” themes with deep religious and nationalistic undertones, making the division between the

two categories inherently problematic and testament to the profound spiritual depth that underpins even his ostensibly nonsacred verse.

In conclusion, Joseph Yahalom's comprehensive edition of Yehudah Halevi's secular poems is an indispensable resource for scholars and enthusiasts of medieval Hebrew literature. It is not merely a collection of poems but a meticulously curated window into the life, times, and profound poetic genius of one of Judaism's most celebrated literary figures. By carefully integrating textual analysis with the invaluable insights from the Cairo Genizah, Yahalom has succeeded in presenting a nuanced and definitive portrait of Halevi, affirming his enduring legacy and the intricate beauty of his multifaceted poetic world.